



Written by
**KAORU
SHINOZAKI**

Illustrated by
KWKM

FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND **ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING**

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS





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An anime-style illustration of a character named Munin. She has long, flowing silver hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a white, lace-trimmed dress with a black collar and a black skirt. A gold chain with circular pendants is draped over her dress. She has large, dark, feathered wings. The background is dark with some light effects. The character is looking down with a slight smile.

MUNIN

“UNLESS THE
GODDESS IS
DEFEATED,
THE FORBIDDEN
WORDS CLAN
WE KUROSAKA
WILL NEVER
KNOW PEACE
AS LONG AS WE
LIVE.”



NYAKI

“DON'T
WORRY!
IT'S JUST
A WORM,
MEOW!”

PIGGYMARU

“IN FACT, IT'S THE
FIRST TIME I'VE EVER
SEEN CROPS SUCH A—
AAAHH,
A GIANT
WORM—!”

SERAS ASHRAIN



THE GREAT EVIL
THE DEMON KING

FAILURE FRAME

I BECAME THE STRONGEST AND ANNIHILATED EVERYTHING

WITH LOW-LEVEL SPELLS



WRITTEN BY
KAORU SHINOZAKI

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HAZURE WAKU NO [JOUTAI IJOU SUKIRU] DE SAIKYOU NI NATTA ORE
GA SUBETE WO JUURIN SURU MADE VOL. 7

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Prologue

“I NEVER DREAMED that the Wildly Beautiful Emperor would choose this moment to bare his fangs.”

In the castle of Alion, Vicius stood smiling behind the desk in her private office. She looked up at Baron Pollary, who had just recently served as commander in the Battle for the White Citadel, and folded her hands on the desktop.

“I will have you gather your forces and proceed to the border between Mira and Ulza immediately. Take command of the Ulzan army and hold back the forces of Mira.”

“Has Mira already begun its attack?” asked Baron Pollary.

“By now, it is entirely possible that it has, yes.”

Mira had reportedly sent Ulza—their neighbors to the east—an invitation to join forces. The Monster Slayer

King of Ulza had blanched at the thought and immediately asked the Goddess for instructions.

Vicius sought to buy some time. It would be best if she could draw out their response to Mira and make preparations of their own.

Unfortunately, the window Mira allowed for response was too short. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor clearly had no intention of allowing the other nations any time to prepare. Nevertheless, Vicius had done what she could to delay Ulza’s reply for as long as possible.

The Baron furrowed his brow and frowned.

“If they manage to capture the fortress of Zoldo in the south, that could be rather troublesome. They could use that position as a base to pour troops across the border into the heartland.”

“That is why I have ordered the king to send his Monster Slayer Knights there immediately. And yet...”

“...You believe that is exactly what Mira wants us to do?”

“Precisely. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor and his older brothers are not idiots. It remains to be seen what strategies they will attempt to deploy against us.”

Then Baron Pollary asked the question that was on everyone's mind: "But why? Why would the Emperor of Mira of all people choose to attack us now?"

"I think," said the Goddess, her beaming smile never faltering, "they are attacking precisely *because* of the current situation."

"How so?" asked the baron.

"While the Demon King still survives, Alion cannot concentrate solely on Mira."

"N-nevertheless... It is too reckless to even consider! If the Sacred Alliance descends into infighting now, it ensures victory for the Demon King's armies!"

"They must be mad," said another of her commanders. "If the forces on this continent holding back the Demon King are exhausted by internal conflict, the evil in the north will pose a threat to Mira as well!"

The Demon King is the only one who would benefit. Unless...

Vicius's smile widened. "As for their choice to betray our nation of Alion now, this might be the only moment available to them. In peacetime, the Empire of Mira could never hope to prevail."

Mira was bordered on the north by the State of Yonato, and the relationship between the two nations was anything but friendly. Yonato would no doubt side with Alion. To their east lay Ulza, whose Monster Slayer King wisely feared Vicius and would likely side with Alion and Yonato as well.

But now, Yonato was barely holding on after suffering heavy losses during the recent Demon King invasion. Mira no longer had to worry about attacks from the north.

Magnar, which held most of the north, had been reduced to thirty percent of its normal strength during the fighting. What remained were the White Wolf Riders and their troops stationed on the eastern front. If those troops were withdrawn, the entire front would collapse. Additionally, Magnar's White Wolf King was missing in action, and no one had any idea if he was alive or dead.

The Holy Empire of Neah and the Bakoss Empire both had their military strength considerably exhausted as well. They did not have the strength left for another large-scale war. In short, only Alion and Ulza

stood in Mira's way.

Our forces have not escaped the battle unscathed either... We lost a fair number of soldiers in the Battle for the White Citadel, while Mira's military strength remains largely intact.

"I...I see." Baron Pollary grunted in agreement. "Still...it's critical that we all join to face this threat together. The Wildly Beautiful Emperor's actions are mad. I have no other words to describe his conduct."

"Quite so... It seems he has had issues with Alion's position for quite some time. But to betray us at this moment is... Well, he has spelled his own doom. In truth, I cannot comprehend what it is he wants. I don't understand it, I simply don't."

"Yes... He must be insane to rebel against you like this, Goddess Vicius."

Vicius quickly withdrew her smile and let out a theatrical sob.

"Goddess...?"

"I work my fingers to the bone in service to all these people. To be threatened and attacked like this by a human... It's all just too cruel. You must agree, of course."

"...Hmm," sighed the Baron half-heartedly.

"..."

"Ah, o-of course I agree! You devote yourself entirely to your work for the people, only to have your efforts ignored in this way—unforgivable!"

"The heroes too are all such troublesome characters to deal with... Oh, woe is me. It's as if I am bound to take on all the misfortune that the world rains down on me..."



“Exactly as you say, it can be very hard to read what it is that Kirihara and Hijiri are thinking at any given time. But Ayaka Sogou is one of the better heroes, is she not?”

“Hm?”

“Eh?”

“Hmmm... Hm-hm-hmm~!♪” Vicius turned her body to face him, slumped a little in her chair, and began to hum to herself.

The baron was taken aback by this sudden performance, which ended almost as soon as it began. She then drew her finger gently across the edge of the desk and inspected the thin layer of dust upon it. She blew the dust from her finger with a puff of her cheeks, and some time passed before she spoke again.

“*Ahem*, let me see.” She turned back to the baron with a warm smile on her face. “Did I just mishear you...? When I disposed of that worthless E-class hero, she went insane and attempted to defy me. Yet I imagined I just heard you refer to her as one of the *better* heroes. I must have been mistaken, mustn’t I? Are you feeling well?”

Baron Pollary turned pale, and a cold sweat formed on his forehead.

“Goddess...” he began, his voice trembling. “B-but as I’m sure you know, the battle prowess she demonstrated at the Battle for the White Citadel was... She *saved the lives* of many who were on the field that day with her actions. Many of the soldiers themselves hold her in high regard!”

“...”

“A-as for my own opinion of the matter! Witnessing the way she risked her life in battle, I-I was greatly moved by the scene, and—”

Thump!

Vicius pounded the desk hard with the flat of her palm, smiling wide all the while. “I’m sorry, I’m having trouble hearing you.”

“H-had you been on that battlefield yourself, then—I’m sure you would understand th... Th-that she... To save as many as she could from the jaws of death, she—”

Thump! Vicius’s thumping on the desk grew louder, but her expression remained unchanged.

Thump! Thump! Thump—!

Her last great thump was much louder than the others, as if she were dealing a finishing blow. After it was over, silence fell on the room.

Vicius repeated her words once more—smiling as she did so.

“I’m sorry, I’m having trouble hearing you.”

The baron pricked right up to attention, feeling as if his heart might jump from his throat in the tense atmosphere.

“I-I...” He spoke slowly. “I... I know I am a man with a penchant for the improper. I cannot claim to be a pure and honest person ... Yet...”

Gulp.

The baron swallowed hard and placed his right hand on his chest.

“Sh-she has proper and clear conviction as a hero—I know of no others like her! It’s true that the Lord of the Flies Brigade ultimately decided the course of the battle...but! It is also clear to me that without Ayaka Sogou we would have never been able to hold on long enough for their arrival! She is the one who defeated the three humanoid types that brought down the Dragonslayer. She is the one who held against an Inner Circle Demon and bought us time until the Lord of the Flies Brigade arrived. All of that was her doing!”

“...”

The baron calmed his short, panicked breathing before continuing.

“...I understand that you have a bad impression of Miss Sogou, Goddess... But if we are to fight together, I think it best that those feelings be set aside for now. We must be unified if we are to survive. At least, that is my opinion on the matter...”

Vicius was still for a while, her grin frozen in place. A tense silence ruled the office for a while longer—before the Goddess finally broke it.

“My, my, that was well said.”

“Huh...?”

“I’m quite sorry. I was testing you, you see.”

“Um...?”

“I think I now know exactly what kind of man you are.” The Goddess smiled. “*Heh heh*. As leader of the military, it will never do for you to simply affirm my opinions at every turn. I can hardly rely on a subordinate who has no firm opinions of their own, nor the strength of mind to refuse to give up their convictions. If you believe your superiors to be wrong, you should be unafraid to speak up—that is how real trust is built in these relationships. You have passed the test, Baron Pollary.”

The baron heaved a sigh of relief. “I-I see, so it was a test... I did not know you to be such a mischievous person...”

“*Heh heh heh*, I’m not a *person* at all though, am I?”

“*Hah hah!* Indeed you are not.”

After giving Baron Pollary a few more orders, she sent him away. Then she sat alone in her office.

Oh, how he underestimates me.

His statement was correct. The Demon King Empire in the north, Mira to the west... We’re caught in a pincer attack between two foes. But does the Wildly Beautiful Emperor, that human, really believe he can win this war? Is he insane?

Falkendotzine Mira DiAsordseat. “Beauty to a wild and crazed extent.” Beautiful and aloof he certainly is...but the man is not insane. No... In fact he’s quite shrewd, just like his two older brothers.

Vicius saw right through his facade.

Mira would never declare a war like this if they had no hope of winning. But in rising against us, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is clearly interfering with our attempts to destroy the root of all evil—he has become an obstacle. He has made himself fair game for removal.

Come to think of it...

Vicius tried to recall the words he had spoken during their meeting prior to the invasion...something about the legend of the God-killer.

I played it off at the time, yet...does Mira truly believe they can defeat me at the head of an Alionese army? If so, then how?

Pulling one foot up onto her chair, she rested her chin on her knee and began to gnaw on a fingernail, deep in thought.

“Forbidden magic...?”

The pieces came together in Vicius’s head in an instant. She suddenly thought of the Sword of Courage who she had assigned to the task.

The Country at the End of the World is located so close to Mira. What if the Wildly Beautiful Emperor has learned of the existence of the forbidden magic and has gotten his hands on the scrolls? If he has somehow learned of the divine beasts too, then...

Vicius’s mind was racing.

What would I do?

I would steal the divine beast that now accompanies the Sword of Courage, make contact with the Forbidden Words Clan, and... No. That wouldn’t work.

But...

Would the Sword of Courage truly allow their divine beast to be captured so easily by the Miran army? Lewin Seale is certainly the strongest Heroic Blood Warrior—on the same level as Civit, or perhaps even greater in terms of potential...or so I flattered him once. But in terms of true strength, he will never reach Civit’s level.

But I think they compare favorably to Mira’s Band of the Sun. All of his group is strong, with Satsuki chief among the pack. They should have no difficulty holding their own against two hundred men at least. Even against the Wildly Beautiful Emperor and his Divine Blade, I cannot imagine Lewin Seale would be defeated.

Who could defeat Lewin Seale, besides myself? Civit Gartland...but he’s dead. Takuto Kirihara? Hijiri Takao? Ayaka Sogou?

Alion’s Sixth Order of Knights surely surpasses them in strength—but they are on our side already. And the “Black Wolf” Sogude Sigmus is by now practically an ally to our cause as well. Meaning that it must be somebody on the Mira side of the equation.

There is no one...

But just then, it occurred to her—there was a player who had yet to fall on the side of either friend or foe.

“The Lord of the Flies Brigade...this Belzegea.”

He was an unknown factor. It was a discomfoting thought.

A cursed-magic user who defeated the Strongest Man in the World. To be frank, he makes me nauseous. Not to mention I hear his magic works on demons too. He defeated the First of the Sworn, that Inner Circle Demon, didn't he? And from accounts, he is in possession of what appeared to be ancient magical items. I must find a way to deal with him.

Thankfully, he has killed the First of the Sworn—proving he is certainly not on the Demon King's side. The best course would be to secure his help as an ally—he may even eliminate my need for the Heroes from Another World entirely. My agents are currently out searching for his whereabouts, and I have orders in place with the Sixth Order of Knights and that A-class hero to attempt to recruit Belzegea if they do happen to encounter him again.

If he refuses the invitation, though...I'll have no choice but to eliminate him.

He has been a nuisance in many ways...like killing the Elite Five. I was terribly inconvenienced by that whole affair. But as another pawn, he would be a fine addition to my collection. How he might be persuaded remains to be seen, but doesn't that Princess Knight travel with his group? In which case it's safe to assume that this Lord of the Flies Brigade will side with the Holy Empire of Neah. Perhaps I can use that as leverage. Then, if I can get the secret to his cursed magic, this power of his that can even affect demons, then—

Vicius sat back deep into her chair.

But first thing first—the Wildly Beautiful Emperor.

And yet there's something strange about all this. I have a disciple stationed in Mira, do I not? What in the world is happening over there? Why was I not informed earlier of this rebellion? Have I been betrayed?

"Inconceivable."

That disciple is a true believer; the likelihood that they betrayed me is vanishingly small... They were born in Mira. They know much of its ways and customs... Which is exactly why I selected them to be sent there in the first place.

Come to think of it, their relatives live in Mira too, do they not?

"Hostages..."

She pounded the desk with her fist. That must be it.

That's it—the Wildly Beautiful Emperor must have taken their family

in Mira hostage, forcing my disciple to send me reports with false information in exchange for guarantees of their safety. That is the only possibility that might lead to betrayal.

“Tch! Taking family members hostage and manipulating people... Such immorality! This is positively inhuman—!” Vicius’s voice rose with indignation. “Such despicable behavior...!”

The Wildly Beautiful Emperor is a fool for using such underhanded tactics in his rebellion. Ayaka Sogou has gone insane with that unexpected strong-minded willfulness of hers. Baron Pollary has lost his mind as well, daring to debate a Goddess such as myself...

“...”

Vicius slumped forward in exasperation, resting her face on the desk. Then she raised her forehead from where it lay but kept her chin on the tabletop. Her expression was vacant, flat and expressionless—like she was looking into the void itself.

Her golden eyes were opened unnaturally wide and round.

“These...” She almost said her notion out loud, then thought better of it.

These brats. They’re all getting too full of themselves.

Chapter 1: The Country at the End of the World

THE FOREST SEEMED to close in around us as bright beams of light filtered down from the sun, directly above.

There were no monsters to be seen.

It's possible we aren't even in the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters anymore, but even so... I can't feel the presence of any living thing at all.

We began to see more exposed rock around us, and the peculiar smell of rock dust tickled my nose. The region we were traversing wasn't really mountainous, but there were clearly fewer trees and plants around us than before. The land looked ill-suited to growing crops. Along the way, we found traces of a settlement and took a quick look around.

It's possible this area used to have extensive mining operations.

All the buildings were abandoned, left to the elements for years it seemed.

This place has no value now that its mines have run dry—the land is barren and unworkable. No country would ever be interested in this region. But I guess that could also make it the perfect place to hide.

I looked up from my map at the great wall before me.

“This is it.”

The stone wall rose straight up from the ground, stretching out to the east and west as far as my eyes could see. Nothing else stood out about the surrounding area—it was just *normal*.

Too normal... It's almost like this place was finely crafted to look completely boring.

I reached out and touched the rock wall.

My hand passed through the surface of the stone.

“Myeow?!” Nyaki gave a start.

“This must be the illusion magic Erika told me about.”

This area tries so hard to appear natural, but it's just eerie. Erika told

me about illusion magic like this... It's difficult for it to capture the "randomness" of real nature.

"...Let's go."

We walked together into the wall and came out on the other side to a path leading through a valley. The wide path led forward with cut stone rising on either side. I didn't sense any living creatures nearby, except for a few birds darting about in the sky overhead.

We can see the sky—does that mean they can see us from above? But...I think that's all an illusion, and what's really above us is something different entirely.

As we continued onward, I thought over a few things as we walked.

The assassins sent by the Empire of Mira to kill the Sword of Courage...Lewin and the others said that they were trying to kill their divine beast, Nyaki. How should I interpret that information, though?

Is Mira trying to destroy the Country at the End of the World too? Even with all the fighting against the Demon King's armies, I heard that Mira's military forces are almost completely intact. And I still don't know how strong that Wildly Beautiful Emperor who leads them truly is. If I have to face off against Alion and Mira at the same time on the battlefield, they might be a little tough to handle.

Then there's Nyaki's "Nee-nya"—Nyantan Kikipat. Eve said Nyantan's one of the strongest warriors that Alion has at their disposal. I might someday end up having to fight her—I'm glad I asked her name. She's the only one of them I can't kill, no matter what.

Then there are the Thirteen Orders of Alion to think about—I don't plan on forgetting about the ones who attacked Lis's village... But unlike with the Sword of Courage, it might be hard to figure out which of their thirteen orders carried out the attack. They sound like a fairly large army—they can't all have participated... There's no guarantee that the ones responsible are even still alive. But, well, if a chance comes my way, that's a score I want to settle too. For Lis and for me.

"There's something sparkling!" said Nyaki, pointing up ahead and pulling me from my thoughts. Where she was pointing, I saw a great silver door set in a frame that was decorated with eccentric, finely detailed carvings. A large, spherical crystal was set into the center of the door.

I took the crystal ball “key” that Erika had entrusted to me from my pouch.

It’s just like Erika said. So...if I put this into that crystal on the door, it should light up and open for us.

“But since you’re here, Nyaki...I don’t think we even need to use this thing. The door should open once you get close enough.”

I took my fly mask out and put it on.

Probably better if they can’t identify that I’m human at a glance... This is a country founded by refugees escaping from the human world, after all. I don’t know how hostile the people who live here would be to me. At the very least, keeping this mask on leaves open the possibility that I might be a demi-human.

“...It would’ve been best if Erika could’ve come along with us as a familiar, though,” I said.

If Erika had been able to talk face to face with the king of the Country at the End of the World through one of her animals, that would’ve been perfect. While it would’ve taken a while, we could have exchanged messages with her using the Ouija board scroll. Doesn’t seem like that’s possible now, though.

We were supposed to meet up with one of Erika’s familiars near the entrance to this place, but they never showed up. That was unsettling, but not surprising—before we left, she had explained that her familiars were just regular animals, with the same physical traits and weaknesses as they always had. If they were attacked by monsters, they could be killed and lost.

Slei had found a dead owl lying near where we saw the illusion of the wall, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that it might have been one of hers. But there was no time to wait around for a replacement.

With their location revealed to that foul Goddess, danger might be closing in on the Country at the End of the World. We need to get word to the King as soon as possible...

I looked up at the door. “Well, I’m sure this will work itself out.”

All that’s left is to do the best I can with the cards I’ve got.

“Sir Too-ka.”

I nodded at Seras.

“Yeah. We’re finally here.”

*The one clan that holds the secret to those Scrolls of Forbidden Magic.
A country of legend, said to be home to the Forbidden Words Clan.*

*Last refuge of the demi-humans and non-golden-eyed monsters, at the
ends of the earth.*

When we approached the door, it began to glow brighter than ever and slowly opened before us.

“Looks like things are getting serious... Finally.”

*The most important piece of the puzzle I need to carry out my revenge
against that foul Goddess is finally within reach.*

We stepped inside.

On the other side of the door, we found ourselves in a cave.

*This place is huge... A vast underground lake...and it looks like there
are ruins of some civilization that used to live down here.*

The architecture nearby was made from some kind of cobblestone. The area was bright, lit by stones embedded in the walls around us. They were similar to the ones I’d seen in the Mills Ruins. The whole scene was like some mystical underground dream.

It’s beautiful, but time to get down to business.

“Guuhhh...”

In front of us, to the left and right, were ridges of higher ground. Human-like shadows, a little shorter than most, moved about to surround us from above.

*Humanoid, with heads a little like dogs... Those must be kobolds.
Luckily for us their eyes are green and not gold.*

“M-Master ...” mumbled Nyaki, as if asking for instructions. I’d told her never to call me “Too-ka” in front of others, to address me only as *Master* or *Belzegea*—and I was thankful she was following the rules.

“I-is there anything Ny-Nyaki can help with...?”

In the next moment, what looked to be a small dragon flew off from one of the ridges above. I kept it fixed in the corner of my eye as I answered, “Nah, it’s okay. Just raise your hands like I’m doing—show them you don’t mean any harm.”

“U-understood!”

“You too, Seras.”

“Understood, Master.”

Slei, in her second stage of transformation, looked as if she was about to bray at the figures above, but she relaxed her stance at my instruction.

We aren't here to fight—only to ask for help. What I need now is a way to win their friendship. It's going to be difficult to negotiate with them later if I annihilate the first people we meet here. I want to avoid using my skills unless it's absolutely necessary. And...I also sense other monsters nearby. I think they're trying to conceal themselves—an ambush maybe?

The way that little dragon flew off from its perch just now—it almost looked like it was sending a message of some kind. It might've gone off to tell some leaders about us. I hope I can find someone who will respond to reason.

Come to think of it...are they even going to be able to understand me? Piggymaru always seems to understand the words that I'm saying. Might as well give it a try...

“We beg an audience with the Immortal King Zect. We were granted a ‘key’ to this place by Erika Anaorbael, and we were told that her name would at least persuade King Zect to receive us.”

I said, trying to talk with the kobolds up above. There was no answer, but a few heads turned to us.

I ground my foot lightly into the dirt below, making a small scraping sound at about the same volume my voice had just been.

“Guh!” The kobolds took up bows and pointed them toward us threateningly.

So they can hear us, then. It's just that they can't understand. Still, it doesn't look like they're attacking on sight at least.

Or so I thought. But in the next moment, an arrow came whooshing at us from above.

Seras drew her sword and cut it down before it reached us, then lowered her body to the ground a little and took up a stance in front of me, a shield against further attacks.

“My apologies,” she said, without turning to look back at me. “I

couldn't help myself."

I could've dodged that arrow myself; she knew that but moved reflexively anyway.

She lowered her sword slowly.

"Can't help that now, can we? It's just..." I replied.

Seeing Seras's sword drawn, the kobolds exploded with howls of murderous rage.

The other monsters which had been hiding took that as a cue to close in, sensing their brethren were in danger.

But none of them are golden eyed. They're different—that's clear to me now. They're wary of us, but...there's reason within them—a quality that those golden-eyed monsters just don't have.

I looked back to see the door still open behind us, showing no signs of closing.

It might just stay open forever, as long as Nyaki is nearby.

"Does this mean...all the demi-humans and monsters that speak the human tongues are gone?"

If all the monsters that we can communicate with are gone... That's really bad news for us.

Suddenly Piggymaru leaped out of my robes and bobbled in the face of the advancing ambush.

"Sq-sq-squ... Squee—!"

The kobolds looked surprised, and the attack ground to a sudden halt.

"Squee! Squee-ee-ee! Squee—! Squ-squ-squ! Squuuh~! Squeuee —!" Piggymaru squeaked loudly, like the little slime was making a case.

"Guhhh?"

"Guh... Gummhh."

There was something different about the kobolds now—the other monsters too. Piggymaru continued to squeak up at them.

"Sir Piggymaru?" Seras looked at the slime, blinking with wide eyes.

What's happening? It's faint, but...I can feel the monsters' murderous

intent fading...

“Squeueh! Sque! Sque! Sque! Squeque! Squee—!”

“P-Piggymaru... Are you interpreting the things that I said to them...?” I asked.

Piggymaru turned green—the color for yes.

“Squee!”

“Piggymaru, you...” I unconsciously put my right hand to my mask and felt a natural smile spreading across my face underneath. “You are awesome, as always... Just how much are you capable of, little guy?”

“Sir Belzegea, look at the monsters,” said Seras.

A change had come over them.

Like they're on standby, waiting for more orders—that's the impression I get. Did Piggymaru's speech just now get through to them?

It looked as if the kobolds were having trouble making up their minds.

“Don't do anything for now. Let's see what happens next.”

“Squee—!”

The kobolds all looked at each other upon hearing the squeak, and fell into a careful, watchful stance themselves—*Piggymaru must've interpreted what I just said.*

“Who are you?” The low voice echoed out toward us, reverberating a little in the cave as a light appeared from one of the tunnels nearby, growing closer and closer until a new group appeared.

“Lay down your arms,” commanded one of the emerging forms.

The female demi-human before us had wings extending from the base of her shoulders. Her hands looked human, but I saw large talons on each fingertip. She walked on two legs, which looked like those of a bird of prey from the thighs downward. Her head had a feathered crest, but otherwise the rest of the creature's body looked relatively human.

She's like a harpy.

She stared with a sharp, piercing gaze. There was nothing crude or unsophisticated about her appearance—her elegant clothes and armor all appeared to be made specifically to fit a harpy's body.

But her voice... It isn't the low one from earlier, the one that asked who we were.

A group of monsters and demi-humans followed close behind the harpy, all of them armed.

"Throw down your weapons," I ordered Seras without turning to look at her.

Seras dropped her sword. I drew the shortsword from my belt and threw it to the ground. The harpy narrowed her eyes at us after watching Seras and I put down our arms.

"Hmph," she snorted.

Doesn't really matter. My status effect skills are my main weapon. If anything happens, I can still use them to react.

"Any magical items?" asked the harpy.

"Nothing for offensive use. If you don't trust us, feel free to check our bags," I answered.

"I'd rather not give you a hostage by sending someone over to look."

Smart.

"Very well." A shadowy figure parted the line of monsters and demi-humans before them and stepped forward toward us—a robed skeleton wearing a crown and holding a staff in one of its bony hands.

That low voice from earlier...this is him. He doesn't look like that skeleton king from the Mills ruins, though. This one looks like a real King of the Skeletons to me.

A clamor of harpies stood in position in front of the skeleton, shielding him from harm. The other harpies nearby all spread their wings and looked ready for a fight.

"Why... Why have you come here?" asked the skeleton king, looking over at Nyaki. "That is...a divine beast. Over there, a monster... an elf...and you there in the Lord of the Flies mask... You are..."

He pointed the tip of his staff at me. "A human...perhaps?"

"Yes," I answered.

A murmur went through the crowd as soon as I spoke.

Makes sense... The monsters and demi-humans all washed up here in

the Country at the End of the World after running from human society. Humans aren't exactly welcome. But I need to address the king of this country. I should play the part of Belzegea here, I think...polite and respectful.

"I am addressing the Most Honorable Immortal King Zect, I take it?" I asked the skeleton king, bowing low as I spoke.

"...Indeed."

I breathed an inward sigh of relief.

A skeleton wearing the garb of a king, just like Erika said. The king here is the same as he has always been, meaning...

"I was instructed by Erika Anaorbael that I should visit the Country at the End of the World to achieve my objective... I come on her counsel."

One of the harpies looked shocked to hear the name. "Highness! This human knows Anael's name...!"

Hm? Anael? Is that what they call Erika here? Come to think of it, "Erika" is just the name she gave herself. She probably had them calling her "Anael" instead of "Anaorbael" because it's shorter...

"...If what you say is true, it does give us pause, and we may consider taking you in. But... It is difficult for me to believe your words unconditionally. Can you show me some proof to lend credence to your claim?"

"Erika Anaorbael granted me a key to this place. She also was the first to tell me of its existence. As for proof..." I placed a hand into my pack, and the honor guard reacted as if I were reaching for a weapon.

"Enough," said King Zect, raising a hand to calm them.

I drew a sealed letter from my backpack.

"This letter was given to me by Erika Anaorbael—I was told that this would communicate her trust in my character, and the character of my companions."

The harpies looked to King Zect for confirmation, and he nodded at them in response. They approached and took the letter from my hands.

"If my name is not enough, give them this." That's what she said, at least...

King Zect took the letter, and the wax popped as he broke the seal and began to read.

How does that even work with no eyes in his sockets?

The soldiers protecting the immortal king didn't let their guard down for a moment. A long silence fell—the letter was lengthy, and the king took his time. Eventually, he finished and neatly folded the letter up with his bony fingers. He treated it delicately, as if it were now something precious to him. He was silent for a few moments longer.

"This is indeed information that only I and Mistress Anael could possess," he said. "She appears to have written this of her own volition... Had she been intimidated or threatened into the writing of this letter, she has ways of covertly alerting me in the text. I saw no such signs."

So she has tricks like that up her sleeves... I'd expect nothing less of the Forbidden Witch. We can rely on her even in her absence.

"As for your group, I believe I've reached an understanding of the situation for now."

King Zect looked at the harpies around him as if steeling his resolve for what he was about to say.

"Under normal circumstances, no humans are ever allowed into our country. But Mistress Anael—I believe she is now calling herself "Erika"—we owe her a great debt. She granted you a key as well, I see. If she has deemed your group worthy of her trust, I must accept you."

I dropped to my knees.

"You have my most sincere gratitude, King Zect."

"You are important guests; there is no need for such formalities."

King Zect turned around with a regal air and began giving orders to his harpies.

"Gratrah, lead these guests into our lands." Then he turned and walked onward.

"Now then, follow us if you please," said one of the harpies flatly, who looked to be an attendant to the king. A number of armed harpies formed up to surround us as we followed behind the procession.

So they don't trust us completely... And harpies don't fly everywhere. Looks like they can walk just fine.

We descended a wide staircase and emerged in a long, straight passageway once we reached the bottom. After walking for quite a while we came out of the tunnel, and my field of vision opened to an incredible scene.

“Oh my...” Seras let slip a gasp at the view spread out before us, and Nyaki looked similarly overwhelmed, an expression of shock on her face.

“M-myeooh...”

To put it simply, the place was an underground kingdom. It looked to be one of the great underground cities built by the ancient civilizations of the world...except that it had clearly been being maintained and improved for generations.

Some of the buildings were covered with vines, and there were tiered walls surrounding the city, rising in height as they extended further from the center. There were buildings lined up on each of the levels of walls. We came out onto a long road which appeared to run straight for some distance. I looked ahead to see that we had fallen some way behind the King and his party. The harpies around us urged us on.

We crossed roads paved for the residents of the city, and I saw many faces in the crowds that turned to watch us pass. There were demi-humans with the heads of dragons. Another race had the upper bodies of men and the lower bodies of horses. Some appeared somewhat orcish, while others looked a little like what I would recognize as a goblin. A unicorn crossed between two alleys as we passed by, and a minotaur-like creature mingled among the throng as well.

There are so many of them... But just as I thought, there are no golden-eyed monsters here. I don't feel any of that unique aggression from them... This place must be a paradise for the non-humans living here.

One of the harpies—the one the king called Gratrah—urged Nyaki onward as she stopped to look at something.

“Don’t stop. Keep walking now, faster.”

“Ny-Nyaki is very sorry!” she said quickly, suddenly jumping back to attention and stumbling forward.

Can hardly blame her for wanting to stop and take all this in though... I've never seen so many demi-humans and monsters gathered in one place

either.

We were looked at curiously by all we passed by—maybe they were careful of new faces around here. Then again, we were surrounded by soldiers too. I didn't sense that they were that wary of us. That might be because none of the new faces they saw were human.

They could see from her ears that Seras was an elf, and Nyaki looked like a beast-type demi-human. Sleil obviously looked like a monster to everyone, and that also went for Piggymaru who poked out of my robes. And none of these people heard the king identify me as a human.

The looks directed at Seras were somewhat different from the ones I received.

I wonder if the other races see Seras as beautiful as well? Judging by their eyes and the reaction they have when they first lay eyes on her, I think that might be a fair assumption.

I did another scan of our surroundings and those in the crowd. I didn't see any elves or dark elves yet.

This place is huge, and with a band of armed harpy soldiers, it seems they have a military of some kind at least.

"Sir Belzegea," whispered Seras, drawing her body closer to me as we walked. "Regarding the matter we learned of from the Sword of Courage... Should we not inform them?"

She means the fact that the Alionese army's on its way here.

"I thought about telling him up front, but I think I want to do so when we're alone with the King. It might be dangerous if some of the others overhear our conversation."

The humans are coming to attack you... Letting information like that out into the wild would only cause confusion. Luckily, it seems like the king here can be reasoned with.

"Whatever happens next...that's up to King Zect himself," I explained.

"I see..." said Seras.

"We need to give him the information as quickly as possible, but I don't think the attack will come in the next twelve hours, or anything quite so soon."

The Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters is between us and Alion. And until recently, Alion, Ulza, and Mira were all at peace—so they shouldn't have any troops stationed close by, even though there might be some of the Disciples of Vicius lurking around. The other Divine Beast should be with the Thirteen Orders of Alion in their homeland.

Lewin Seale told me *The Sixth Order of Knights* would make their move once the location of the Country at the End of the World had been found. I think it's safe to say we have a little time to prepare.

Gratrah turned around to look at us. "What are you two whispering about?" she asked.

"We were just agreeing that King Zect appears trustworthy," I answered in a calm and relaxed tone.

She looked at me suspiciously, and her features tensed into a glare. "...Of course he is. His Highness possesses incredible talents as king. I will permit no insolence or violence directed toward His Majesty. Is that understood?"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

After some time, the castle we had seen in the distance on arrival in the city came into closer view. It was backed by a great stone wall—or rather, it looked like the castle and the wall were part of the same colossal structure. I wondered if it had been built that way from the beginning.

The farther we walked toward what seemed to be the inner citadel, the higher we climbed. It made sense from a defensive point of view. Soon after, we arrived at the castle gates.

We stood for a moment looking up at the inner citadel.

"This is truly... It's like the fortress of some ancient civilization, Seras gasped. The towering majesty of the sight before her had taken her breath away.

Nyaki was shocked too. "Seeing it so close, it's a-meow-zing... Myaah~!"

Vines and patches of moss grew all around the area; the land was completely subterranean, but it was far from barren rock. Inside the castle I could make out flowers and bushes that looked well attended. I could make out gardens now too, with kobolds bent over tending to their crops.

Two orc soldiers stood on either side of the castle gates, spears in their hands and horned helmets atop their heads. They were clearly smaller than the ogre soldiers who had fought with the Demon King's armies, and a little fatter. The ogre soldiers I'd seen on the battlefield were practically hunks of pure muscle.

The orc soldiers glanced at us but otherwise made no signs of movement.

Maybe they're just one of the quieter and more reserved races, despite how they look.

"This way," said Gratrah, walking into the citadel ahead. The inside of the place gave me the impression it had been standing for centuries.

Looks like it's well maintained, though. Houses can look great even if they were built decades ago, so why not castles...?

I saw demi-humans in the castle, some dressed in maid uniforms—none seemed surprised at Sleif's presence inside the castle itself. That alone showed the cultural difference between this society and the human kingdoms.

The people of the castle were looking at us with curiosity for a different reason—as if they weren't used to seeing new people in the citadel at all.

"You don't seem all that curious about your surroundings," noted the harpy Gratrah, who had been turning around to check on us at regular intervals.

How can she tell that even under this mask I'm wearing?

"Would you like me to appear more curious then, Gratrah-dono?" I answered.

She quickly turned away from me and lifted her nose into the air. "No. That is not what I meant, exactly."

We came to a set of stairs and she briskly walked up them, leaving her terse statement hanging in the air. We followed and were eventually guided to a room on one of the upper floors.

"You will wait in here. When preparations are complete, a servant will be sent for you," said Gratrah. "I will remain here to watch over you in the meantime." Then she stood in a corner of the room, as did the other harpy soldiers who had escorted us.

Well...Erika's letter was effective, but it looks like we still have to earn some trust. The only one who truly trusts us might be the king—I get the feeling that the rest of them have only accepted us on his word.

“Might we sit down on the chairs over there?” I asked Gratrah, and she nodded silently in reply.

Nyaki and Seras sat side by side, and Sleilay down on the floor in front of them. I took a seat as well, facing Gratrah.

“Is it quite rare for newcomers to enter the citadel, I wonder?” I asked

Her answer was silence and sharp eyes glaring back at me.

I noticed Nyaki looking at me worriedly, likely unsettled by Gratrah's attitude.

She's wary—but there's no malice. She's shown no intention of hurting us. She only wants to protect this country and her king. She's taking her job seriously, but she doesn't seem all that flexible about how she does it.

After some time had passed, a female soldier opened the door of our waiting room. She had the lower body of a snake and upper body of a human. I remembered those demi-humans were called lamias.

“Lady Gratrah,” she said. Her armor was somewhat revealing, but otherwise the lamia appeared to be some kind of knight. Gratrah stood and made her way from the room, beckoning for us to follow to our next destination.

King Zect was already sitting alone in the room when we arrived. The space had the look of a meeting room—the perfect place to talk. There was a large table set in the center, and all shapes and sizes of chairs were set about it.

Ahh... Those must be for the different races and their various body types.

The closest chair to the entrance was a “normal”-sized chair that looked like it would comfortably seat a human. In the seat furthest from the entrance, at the head of the table, sat King Zect.

“Please, sit,” he said, gesturing with his hands. “Lord of the Flies, take the seat opposite mine.”

I did as he asked, and Seras and Nyaki sat on my right and left. Sleilay stood next to me on the right. Gratrah walked to stand at her king's

side as the harpy guards closed the door of the meeting room.

I could feel the presence of someone hidden nearby.

“Is something wrong, Sir Belzegea?”

“...No,” I said slowly.

“Now then. Your reason for visiting our country is because you wish to meet the Forbidden Words Clan, no?” asked King Zect.

“Yes.”

“What do you intend on doing upon your meeting with them?” asked the king.

“...Apologies for my rudeness, but I have a favor to ask of you, King Zect.”

“Then speak it.”

“Might we talk alone?”

“What—?!” Gratrah was visibly ruffled by the suggestion.

“That would include those in the hidden room next door—or in the walls. I would like everybody out, if possible.”

There are probably soldiers stationed there, concealing themselves just in case anything happens to their king. King Zect's security is tight, and they aren't taking us lightly. Not that I blame them...

“Wh-what nonsense are you trying to suggest, you cretin—?!” Gratrah shouted, her beautiful eyebrows tensed into a furious and disgusted frown. She leaned forward, but King Zect stopped her with a wave of his hand.

“Very well.”

“B-but, Highness... Imagine the danger... We do not know from whence he has come...!”

“Gratrah, listen to my words...” the king replied calmly. “If not for Mistress Erika, our people would have long since crumbled. She sent these people here to us... I trust them, just as I trust Mistress Erika herself.”

“B-but, my king—”

King Zect lowered his hand, and after a moment's pause, turned his gaze back in my direction.

"I do not know if these matters concern the Forbidden Words Clan, but...I believe these people have urgent business to attend to here."

This skeleton king is observant.

"Gratrah!" King Zect said firmly. "See to it that all are removed from this room. Take Amia and the others, and wait outside."

"Ah—y-yes...! Yes, my king," she said hesitantly.

"My apologies for the trouble, Gratrah," said the king.

"Not at all... Please call for me at once if he makes any improper moves."

"Of course. I am counting on you."

He's kind to his subordinates too—not the type to use orders to pressure them into doing his bidding.

I felt the hidden presences getting further away. There must have been unseen passages within the walls.

"Seras, take everyone outside," I ordered.

"You will be unable to tell his true statements from lies, Master," she whispered, bringing her face in close to the ear of my mask.

"That's fine." I could hardly ask him to send his guards away and keep mine at my side, after all.

Seras nodded and silently led Nyaki and Sleil from the room.

King Zect and I were the only ones who remained in the meeting room.

"Is this an acceptable distance?" he asked.

"You're quite right... Our companions may have been sent away, but we are still perhaps a little far apart for a truly confidential discussion. Might I sit closer?"

"Please, sit as close as you like."

With his permission, I took a seat closer to the king.

"This matter appears important indeed. I have quite a few questions for you myself, Sir Belzegea ... But please, speak first."

"Of course..." I proceeded to tell the king that the Goddess's forces were on their way to invade his country. I told him of Nyaki, of

the Sword of Courage, and of the potential danger that his people might be in. I tried to be brief, often focusing only on the main points in my explanation. I gave the king what details I felt were necessary for context and to avoid appearing too short on information. As I spoke, I saw King Zect grow anxious, but he kept his feelings in check and listened quietly until I was done.

“—And that is the situation,” I finished.

King Zect lowered his head despondently.

“I see... So the outside world still views us with fear after all.”

“I...I do not believe that is entirely true. At present, it appears only the Goddess and those around her are so in favor of this attack against your people.”

“You mean to say...this attack is led by the Goddess personally? It does not have the general support of those in the outside world?”

“I have not seen all that this world has to offer. But... I hear that each country has quite different views on demi-humans as a whole.”

“I see...” answered the king, sounding somewhat relieved.

“We still have some leeway before the Goddess’s forces arrive here. But if you intend on fighting them, we will need that time to prepare. That is why I wished to convey this matter to you as soon as possible. But if news of this attack were to spread unchecked, I knew it might cause panic and confusion.”

“I very much appreciate your discretion, Sir Belzegea... I will confer with my subjects at once on our next course of action. With regards to your objective here—the Forbidden Words Clan.”

Here it comes. Moment of truth...

“They... Do they still survive, living in this country of yours?” I asked, with fear in the pit of my stomach.

King Zect looked at me squarely. “Worry not—they remain living here in our country.”

They’re here.

They’re alive.

The Forbidden Words Clan survives!

“Do you wish to meet with them as soon as possible?” asked the

king.

“I could wish for nothing more,” I answered.

“Understood. The Kurosaga will have to agree to the meeting themselves of course.”

“Kurosaga?”

“Another name for the Forbidden Words Clan—their own name, you could say. Their clan is descended from the Kurosaga bloodline... It has become a general term for their kind,” King Zect continued. “But that is neither here nor there. Your introduction to the Forbidden Words Clan...is also a request from Mistress Erika herself. So long as the Kurosaga are not dead set against meeting you, I will do my best to arrange it.”

“You have my utmost thanks.”

King Zect stared at me incredulously with his eyeless sockets.

“...Is something wrong?”

“We are alone at present, so for just these personal meetings... could you perhaps stop that absurd acting and exaggerated politeness?”

I stopped to think for a few moments.

“What gives you that idea?”

“It was written in Mistress Erika’s letter.” King Zect gave a hollow chuckle before continuing. “She wrote that putting a stop to your colorful acting might give me a better insight into your true character... even if that might mean overlooking a certain amount of rudeness.”

“I see.”

“In other circumstances, more casual speech might prompt outbursts from my subordinates. But in personal meetings, that matters not. Could you engage me as the *real* you? The immortal king and the Lord of the Flies... Both of us are royalty, are we not?” King Zect said with another chuckle. “Let us speak as equals.”

“I-I’m not as grand as a *king*, to be honest.” I said, switching my tone of voice back to my normal everyday speech. “But if that’s how you want it, let’s talk like this then when we’re alone.”

“Ha! Now...I think that suits you better.”

“Looks like he’ll be able to introduce us to the Forbidden Words Clan,” I said once I returned to the waiting room.

King Zect and I had spoken for a short while longer, and then he had called in some of those waiting outside to discuss their next course of action.

Well, makes sense. Preparing for an invasion should be their top priority.

I had been asked to return to where Seras and the others were waiting in the meantime. As soon as I entered and shut the door, I noticed that Gratrah was gone, and only two soldiers remained on watch duty. Seras sat down delicately on a long sofa, politely arranging her long top around her rear as she did so.

“We’ve finally taken a big step toward the secrets of forbidden magic then,” she said.

“Yeah.”

But for now, we’re waiting. Might as well get that other thing out of the way too...

“Nyaki.” I looked at the catgirl, who was sitting next to Seras on the sofa with her arms neatly folded.

“Meow?”

“Now that we’ve arrived here in the Country at the End of the World...what are your plans?”

“L-let me see...” She thought for a while.

“If you stay here in the care of the people of this country...you might not be permitted to come and go as you like,” I said.

“Meow, yes.”

“The people of this country don’t want outsiders to know of its existence. Those who want to protect it don’t want anyone who knows the location of the door to leave, let alone a divine beast who can open the door itself.” I paused. “That means it’ll be difficult for you to see Nee-nya and Mai-nya again.”

Nyaki was silent.

“You’ll have to stay in this country—live here. And you may never be able to leave again.”

“Nyaki...was ready for this,” she said, smiling sadly. “Of course Nyaki would love to meet Nee-nya and Mai-nya again, but if Nyaki leaves, she knows she’d cause so many problems for the people of this country. Nyaki knows that.”

Seems like she understands.

Anyone who captured her might do terrible things to make her give up the country’s location and use her to open the door. Even if I promise to protect Nyaki, if word got out among the citizens that the “key” to their country had left with us, that’d put King Zect’s position in jeopardy.

“—Nyaki.”

“Meow?”

“When all this is over...I’ll try to make sure you can see Nee-nya and Mai-nya again. If I explain the situation to Nyantan, she should be able to arrange to come here to see you. I’ll talk with King Zect later about making it happen.”

Nyaki raised her head, a look of surprise on her face.

“M-Master ...”

“I’ll do everything I can, but it’s not a definite promise. Please understand that.”

“Nyaki u-understands!”

“First, I’ll negotiate to see if the people of this country can take care of you while we’re gone.”

Nyaki lowered her head again. “Nyaki is so, so sorry! Thank you, thank you! Nyaki will pay you back for your kindness someday, she swears it!”

There was hope in her voice, mixed in there with the gratitude. Seras looked over at Nyaki with a kind smile, and a few moments passed before I spoke again.

“You just said you’d pay me back, right?”

“M-meow, yes!”

“Then do you mind if I ask you a favor?”

“Ny-Nyaki will do anything! Anything Nyaki’s capable of doing...!” she said, leaning forward a bit on the sofa.

“There’s a girl—a dark elf named Lis. Right now, she’s living with

the Forbidden Witch—er, Erika Anaorbael—in the depths of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters. I want you to meet her someday.”

“So...you’re only asking Nyaki to meet Lis?” She seemed willing but uncertain why I’d ask such a thing.

“I’ll be with you when it happens of course, so the golden-eyed monsters won’t be a problem.”

I’m already pretty used to traveling the area. As long as we approach from any direction but north, we should be fine. Can’t afford to be complacent.

“I’d like you to be friends with her, if you could.”

“F-friends...?”

I don’t know either of their real ages, but they’re both just kids. Lis is so considerate...too considerate toward the adults around her, and the same goes for Nyaki. Lis doesn’t have any friends her age who she can open up to. Piggymaru and Sleir are friends, but that’s a little different. Wouldn’t Nyaki be a good friend for Lis to have?

Come to think of it, am I even an adult? Ugh...probably better to think about that some other time.

But I get the feeling they would be friends. When I was Lis’s age...I didn’t have any friends. There were some kids who took an interest in me, but my real parents kept them away. They didn’t want anyone to know about our family situation—if something got out, someone could report them. I want Lis to have the opportunity to make real friends her own age.

“O-of course! Nyaki will try her best to be friends with Lis! Nyaki thinks...” She timidly rubbed the tips of her paws together. “Nyaki would also...like to have a friend!”

As I checked the time on my pocket watch, the door to our room opened.

I stood along with Seras and Nyaki as a lamia knight entered. Her lower body was black and serpentine, but the skin on her upper body was white. Her eyes were just as stern as her eyebrows, and her face looked beautiful, framed by her black hair.

Looks like she’s wearing some sort of face veil. In fantasy stories, I picture dancers wearing things like that. Just judging by this lamia’s upper

body, she has a great figure. Not sure if the lamia world thinks about things the same way though.

Her armor looked different from the other lamia knight we had seen earlier—she was possibly of a higher rank. Her armored headband looked more complex than the other knights', and there was a longsword hanging in a scabbard at her waist.

"I'm one of the Four Shining Warriors, Amia Plum Lynx," said the lamia, the tip of her tail slithering about behind her as she introduced herself. "Please, just call me Amia. I've been ordered by His Majesty to sort out your meeting with Kurosaga."

So we're going right now, huh? I was prepared to wait a day or so at least... I'll have to thank the king next time I see him.

"Nice to meet you, Sir Belzegea." Amia stretched out her long-gloved hand for me to shake.

I took the lamia knight's hand in mine. "Nice to meet you too."

Seems friendlier than Gratrah, at least. Or rather, she doesn't seem all that threatened by us at all. "Amia..." Didn't King Zect say her name when he was clearing his guards from the room? She must have been one of the ones concealed and listening in.

"You're going to be the only one meeting with Kurosaga today, Sir Belzegea. They don't like engaging with the other clans. Meeting them with this many adults in tow could make them wary. I suggest the rest of you wait here."

I looked at Seras, who made the gesture that she wasn't lying in response.

Doesn't seem like this is some means of splitting us up. I do think we can trust King Zect... But it's too early to completely let our guards down yet.

"Right then, Seras, please wait here with everyone. If anything should happen, I leave the decision-making up to you," I ordered.

"Understood," Seras replied, sitting back down on the sofa.

Amia suddenly poked at my robes with her finger. "The slime stays behind too."

"Squee?!"

"It might make Kurosaga nervous," said Amia.

“Is that so? Sorry, Piggymaru. You’ll have to sit this one out.”

“Squ...” It bounced out of my robes, and I turned back to face Amia.

“All right, Amia-dono, I’m ready to meet the Forbidden Words Clan.”

I took some of my belongings with me in a spare backpack and walked beside Amia as we made our way down the hallway. It seemed we’d be leaving the citadel.

“Are King Zect and his advisors still in their meeting?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Amia nodded. “They’re still in the meeting room. I was asked to hang out with you.”

“Are you sure that’s all right?”

“Those were His Majesty’s orders. My job’s to follow them.” She shrugged. “And if your business with Kurosaga is going to take a long time, I’ll be the one to arrange rooms and meals for your companions.”

“You have my thanks.”

“...Still on your best behavior because you’re not sure about us?”

“I trust King Zect, but I barely know anything else about this place or the people who live here.”

“Sure...but we don’t know you either. I guess we can take our time getting to know each other, huh?”

“Might I ask you some questions as we walk?”

“Yeah, why not?”

Looks like it’s time to gather information again.

“Who are the Four Shining Warriors?”

Judging by the name, sounds like they’re higher-ups around here, like some kind of elite four group.

“Eh, it’s just a title given to our top four members to honor our prowess in battle. The four of us are also leaders of our own respective army corps too, yep.”

That’s kind of what I expected.

“Is Gratrah-dono a member?”

“Nah, she’s captain of the King’s personal guard.”

Amia raised a hand to acknowledge the orc soldiers who saluted her as they passed by.

“The Four Shining Warriors, His Majesty the King, his personal guard, and the honorable prime minister of our nation are often called the *Seven Lights* of the kingdom.”

“The seven shining stars that hold up the Country at the End of the World. I see.”

“That might be a stretch, but yep.”

It doesn’t look like they have much unique culture of their own—their lives seem almost completely human. Only difference between this place and the outside is that there are people like Amia instead of humans.

“Society here is very much like other countries, from the looks of it.”

“That’s His Majesty’s policy, yeah.”

“Why was this policy put in place?”

“We might come to live in harmony with the humans again someday. People think we’ll be able to blend into human society better if we get used to their culture and everyday rituals.”

“Was that all King Zect’s idea?”

“Yeah, suppose so,” said Amia, giving me the side eye.

“I-is something wrong?” I asked.

“I heard Mistress Anael was the one that gave you our country’s location... Seems that she didn’t tell you much more than that.”

I know too little about this place, and it’s making me suspicious.

“She told me that all she did was offer her wisdom and tools to your country and that she’d never been here in person. She also said that was a long time ago and few of the people she knew would still be alive today.”

She didn’t see much point in giving me information that might already be out of date. King Zect would probably be the only surviving person she’d know. Erika looked a little sad when she spoke of that time. The months turned to years...

With Seras’s long life span—I suppose the same goes for her too.

Amia nodded in agreement.

“Can’t say I’ve ever met Mistress Anael in person—only the king has, and some of the folks with longer life spans. None of the Four Shining Warriors do, that’s for sure. She’s more of a legend to us, you could say.”

That made sense, but I tried to steer the topic back to what I was interested in. “So, you’re correct that I know almost nothing about this country. I would really appreciate it if you could teach me more about it, Amia-dono.”

“You want me to play tour guide? Sure about that?”

“You’re just really easy to talk to, and your answers to my questions are so clear. I think you will be the perfect teacher.”

“Really?! Well, why not, yeah?”

Amia puffed out her chest proudly, her face veil fluttering as she exhaled through her nose.

Man—that was easy.

She can move her upper body like that while her lower half is slithering slowly underneath her—lamia are capable of skillfully controlling their walking speed. Observing demi-humans like this is really interesting.

And so Amia taught me a lot about her world as we proceeded to our destination, and I felt like I got a fair amount of intel from our discussion.

After we left the castle, we headed west. We passed through a series of stone walls dotted with doors and passageways.

Looks like there’s more to this country than the city-like area near the castle. I wonder how far this part continues?

After passing through the western part of the city, we entered one of many doors set in a wall. The passageway beyond the door looked like a manmade tunnel, faintly lit by the glowing stones inside. After traveling for a while, the space around us opened up into what looked like a small village inside a cave. In the far corner I could see a spring and a small grove of trees. There were patterns carved into the rock of the walls and up on the ceiling.

This area looks like it used to be part of the ruins.

A small number of people with silver hair and gray eyes came into

view. They looked like normal humans, save for one thing—black wings.

So this is the Forbidden Words Clan.

All of them looked in our direction, their attention focused mainly on me.

There are all kinds of different-looking races here in the Country at the End of the World, but I'm the only person wearing a Lord of the Flies mask... I guess I'm bound to draw some attention. They don't seem wary of me, though. That's likely because Amia's escorting me.

"And this is the Kurosaga Clan's village," said Amia, like a tour guide. "They should've already been told about your visit, but I'll go see the clan chief anyway. Hang out here for a minute, yeah?"

Amia slithered away.

We weren't together for long, but after that conversation on the road—I feel like she's gotten a lot friendlier toward me now.

...Eh?

I noticed someone staring at me. At first glance, I thought this was an unusually beautiful boy, but after a second look, I realized she was a short-haired girl.

She looks like a teenager, I think? Seems pretty timid.

When I looked back at her, she averted her eyes and ran.

Eventually Amia returned.

"All right. Come with me then, Sir Belzegea."

She led me to an earthen-walled building in the center of the village, a bit bigger than the ones surrounding it. There were no guards at the door, and the old building just stood there quietly as we stopped in front of it.

"Go on," Amia urged me inside.

"You aren't coming?" I asked.

"Nah, the village chief wants a word with you. Alone. I'll be waiting out here." Amia pointed to the building, then began to move her finger around as she gave me directions. "Once you get in there, go straight down the hall and turn left. Munin, the village chief, is in the room at the far end."

I stepped inside and saw that the building was old but well kept. Whoever was looking after it paid a lot of attention to detail. I followed Amia's directions and found myself standing in front of a closed door.

I knocked and called out, "My name is Belzegea."

"Enter," a woman's voice replied—it sounded warm.

The room was wide, with a large wooden chair set against the far wall. The chair was draped with sheets of cloth, and orange lamps lit the room with warm light. It felt like some sort of unused audience chamber.

"Forgive the intrusion," I said as I stepped inside.

"You have business you wish to speak of?"

A graceful woman stood in the center of the room. She was just a little shorter than me and neither thin nor chubby. Her long silver hair was parted neatly in the center of her forehead, spilling down over the snow-white skin on her shoulders and across her chest and back. It struck me that it might be a little darker than the Goddess's own silver hair.

But unlike the Goddess, she had a pair of black wings on her back.

Her eyebrows were as perfect as if they had been drawn on with a calligraphy brush above her narrow eyes. Her face seemed to radiate a gentle warmth—there was no severity to her expression at all.

"First I should introduce myself, I suppose," said the village chief with a light smile.

Perhaps because of my mask, there was a little nervousness in her tone...but there was calm there too.

She might be older than she looks. There's a real "adult" kind of calm about her. She might even be way older than me—like some kind of witch.

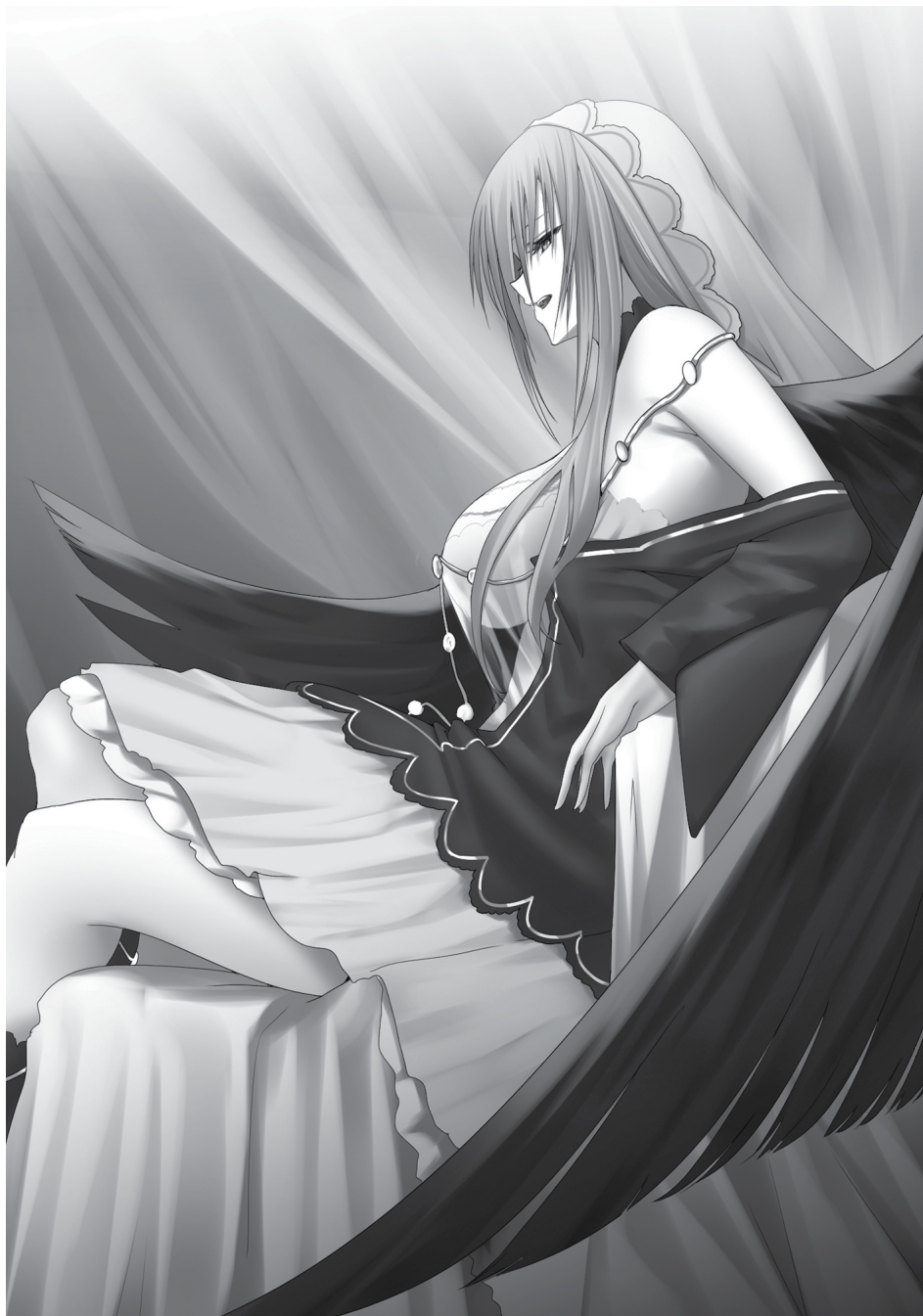
That outfit looks kind of like a toga, or something they'd wear in Ancient Greece. Is she some kind of shaman maybe? Someone in charge of the rituals to the gods?

Looking closer, I saw the white cloth was sheer in parts, making her clothes somewhat revealing. The veil on her head looked like a nun's habit, and part of that was see-through as well.

Come to think of it, Seras used to wear a veil when she was going

under the name Mist, didn't she? Compared to what Seras used to look like, this woman could barely pass for a nun at all.

“I am the village chief of Kurosaga. My name is Munin,” said the woman, turning to face me as she introduced herself.



“Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you today. As I said, my name is Belzegea, leader of the band of mercenaries known as the Lord of the Flies Brigade.”

Munin smiled and nodded back at me.

“Please, take a seat over there,” she said, pointing to a nearby chair that was facing hers.

I took a seat, and she did likewise, gracefully placing her hands in her lap. “Now then, what business do you have with our Forbidden Words Clan?”

“Might I be plain and direct with my request?”

“Certainly.”

I took the Scrolls of Forbidden Magic from my backpack and held one out toward her.

“Those are...”

“I have heard that the people of your clan are the only ones that can read the words written on these scrolls. I want to know what they say... I want the power of the forbidden magic concealed within them.”

“—Forbidden magic.” Munin swallowed, and her narrowed eyes opened wider upon hearing my words. I saw they were gray, with a faint hint of blue—like precious gemstones. She seemed uneasy as I watched her closely.

“Ahem... Y-you—” She swallowed hard again, the sound even louder than the last. “*Why* do you wish to obtain Forbidden Magic?”

I offered her my left hand—the same one I’d used to raise a middle finger to that foul Goddess as she sent me away. “I need to crush someone completely—so thoroughly that they never rise again.”

I met Munin’s wavering eyes with my own. Her exposed thighs were lightly trembling as she placed a hand to her chest and took a deep breath.

“Who?” she asked.

“The divine...” I brought her abominable name to my lips. “The Goddess of Alion—Vicius.”

Chapter 2: Meanwhile, Across the Continent

“WHY...DO YOU WISH to do this?” Munin’s eyes wandered as if she was searching for the right words to say.

“Revenge,” I replied simply.

“Belzegea-san, I...” The words stuck in her throat, and she looked down to the floor. Her lips pressed tightly together for a few silent moments, then she raised her head to speak once more. “I understand.”

“Meaning...?” I asked.

“We will cooperate. We will help you get your revenge.”

Hearing the words *forbidden magic* had clearly thrown Munin off balance—but now there was a new emotion shining in her gray-blue eyes.

Hope.

Her legs were trembling, and she took several more calming breaths. It was as if a long-anticipated moment had finally come. I’d taken a gamble that this would be the case when I bluntly stated my reason for wanting to obtain the forbidden magic’s power.

“I suppose this means you have your own opinions about the Goddess, then?”

Munin pursed her lips and gathered her thoughts before saying, “The Goddess wishes to see us—the Forbidden Words Clan—erased from this world.”

“So your people escaped here when they discovered the Goddess’s plans?”

Munin folded her hands in her lap and nodded. “I do not know exactly what the incantations of the forbidden magic do. But, as I’m sure you are aware, the Goddess sees them as a threat. Knowledge of this has been passed down from parent to child in our clan.

“Our generation knows nothing of the outside world.” A sad smile appeared on Munin’s face. “If the Goddess were to discover any of our kind out there, she would surely kill them.”

She looked down at the wooden floor as she began to search her memories. “Once the Goddess learned of the forbidden magic, she began her efforts to exterminate our people living in the world outside. But just as she did so...the root of all evil descended.”

So they managed to hide in the confusion, eh? That’s when the demi-humans, monsters, and Forbidden Words Clan made their great migration here.

“It’s said that the first root of all evil was particularly brutal—their armies so fierce, it made the people shiver at the prospect of invasion. Ironically, that forced the Goddess to pour all her strength and human forces into the war in the north. She had nothing to spare for her crusade against us.”

Munin told me of how the demi-humans and monsters of the continent saw that their time there was coming to an end. Demi-humans were targets for persecution, and non-golden-eyed monsters were viewed as dangerous creatures. In the climate of fear sweeping the continent, a small group of demi-humans began to form plans to find themselves somewhere safe, a place where the humans of the world would not find them. One of those early organizers was the Immortal Zect.

Eventually, they discovered a large underground ruin that had been forgotten by the rest of the world. Anaorbael helped them, offering her wisdom and tools to aid their great migration, and the Immortal Zect led them.

Munin paused in her explanation.

Is she remembering her brethren who were slaughtered back then?

After a moment of silence, she spoke again.

“During the great chaos brought by the root of all evil, we took our opportunity to escape the wrath of the Goddess...”

“Your Forbidden Words Clan managed to escape her reach, but...”

She still hasn’t given up. Munin must have already learned that from one of King Zect’s messengers.

I began to tell Munin about my recent discoveries—about Vicius’s intentions, my defeat of the Sword of Courage, and the Goddess’s possession of another divine beast. Most importantly, I explained that the Goddess’s men were likely already on their way.

“It seems the Goddess has not yet given up on totally exterminating your Forbidden Words.”

“So it seems.” Munin’s shoulders sank, but a look of confidence soon flashed back onto her face.

“I’m sure that the Goddess learned of our clan’s disappearance after her war. We vanished, along with many other demi-humans and monsters from the continent. King Zect speculates that Anael has done something to hide our presence from her, further hindering her ability to find us.”

That does sound possible—this is Erika we’re talking about.

“But as you’re aware, Belzegea, the Goddess has never given up on finding us. I believe she will not rest until she exterminates our people completely.”

“I agree with you there.”

The existence of this forbidden magic is a threat the Goddess cannot overlook.

Munin gazed at me intently. “Unless the Goddess is defeated, the Forbidden Words Clan—we Kurosaga—will never know peace as long as we live.”

“So that means...”

“Yes, Belzegea.” She rose quickly from her chair. “You will have our aid.”

There was a strong determination in her eyes as she looked straight into mine. I grinned to myself under my mask.

We want the same thing. That disgusting Goddess is immortal unless we crush her for good. Vicius will meddle and work her evil until she is stopped—and that’s the only way Kurosaga can survive.

I stood and bowed my head. “I greatly appreciate any help you can provide. I’m delighted to have you as an ally.

“So, where to begin?” I continued. “Regarding the forbidden magic, Munin-dono...”

“There is no need for you to address me so formally,” she replied. Her stern expression from earlier had softened somewhat, and her eyes smiled at me as she spoke. “I have simply been calling you Belzegea, after all.”

“...Munin-san, then. Could you impart to me what you know of the forbidden magic? I know so little about it. The only information I have is that these are Scrolls of Forbidden Magic and that the spells contained within might be effective against the Goddess.”

“Well, as the name of our clan suggests, we are capable of reading special ancient texts.” Munin narrowed her eyes and gave me an understanding smile which turned a little bitter. “But the “Forbidden Words Clan” is simply the name that Goddess fixed us with. We have never claimed it as our own.”

“You’re called Kurosaga, correct?” I asked.

“Yes. But since we were children, we have all been taught to think of ourselves as a clan of forbidden words. We have no hatred for the term. Please do not worry about offending us by using it.”

“I understand.”

“The Forbidden Words” isn’t a forbidden term, then.

“Are you aware of how one might activate this magic?” I asked.

“I have never done so myself, nor read the scrolls before today. This is the first time any have been brought into this village.”

Frustrating, but it makes sense.

“But I do know how to activate them.”

That’s good news at least! I won’t have to search for the method myself.

Munin began to explain. “First, one has to read the incantation written on the scrolls. Then, the forbidden magic must *settle* within the caster themselves.”

So it’s like the caster absorbs the forbidden magic, I guess?

“When that is complete, a part of the caster’s body will be carved with the symbols. After that, they can activate the forbidden magic with further incantation, although doing so requires mana. The Kurosaga have long trained in the art of producing and manipulating mana, so we should have no issues with this aspect of the process. But the most important aspect of this is...Belzegea? Is something wrong?”

“Well...before the process of activating the magic even begins...” I began to lay out my concerns. “What do you know of the magic itself? In other words, is it completely unknown what effects this magic is

capable of before it's cast?"

A slightly embarrassed look appeared on Munin's face. "We are taught that there is no single kind of forbidden magic. In order to understand what kind of spell one is using, I believe we need to... Might I see one of those scrolls, perchance?"

I untied one from the bunch and handed it to Munin, who unfurled it and inspected it closely. Before long, her eyes opened wide. She came over to stand next to me and pointed to some script at the bottom of the scroll, leaning in almost uncomfortably close

"This scroll is not for an incantation."

"It's not?"

"This one only details the effects of the forbidden magic."

I expected I'd just need to guess the effect based on the incantation's name, but it sounds like all the details are written here.

"What effects does the scroll describe?"

"A power capable of destroying any and all defensive barriers a divine being might possess, sealing them away and preventing their further use."

A voice awoke in the back of my head—the grating tones of that foul Goddess as she looked down on me back then.

"Let me put this in a way that even an E-Class hero will understand. I keep a protective 'Dispel Bubble' around me at all times..."

A protective film—a thin wall around her.

"...which makes me completely immune to status effect spells."

Complete immunity. A defensive spell—or a barrier system, you might say.

I can't be sure. Never say never, but...

"That will do." I looked at the Scroll of Forbidden Magic held out in front of me and pointed right at it. "This is exactly what I've been looking for."

"Is it possible for those who are not members of the Forbidden Words Clan to invoke a forbidden magic spell? If I can learn to read the writing, will I be able to use it?" I asked as I put away the scroll.

Munin looked a little troubled by the question. "Yes, but also no."

Both possible and not, huh... That seems vague.

She continued. "Strictly speaking, you should be able to perform the act of *settling*."

"But there's another problem?"

"Yes..."

She untied the string on her toga from the knot at her shoulder. She took a few steps away from me and turned her back as the loose cloth fell away. She covered her chest with one arm, then pushed the cloth further down until it rested near her hips. With her upper back completely exposed, Munin turned her head slowly to face me.

"Please, look at this."

Her black wings extended from her shoulder blades, and just below her neckline was a patterned circular mark. It was a light gray, almost like a tattoo on her skin.

"This mark is said to represent two wings, two arms, two eyes, a sword, a shield, and...chains."

I wouldn't have realized all that without the explanation... The symbols have all been so simplified it's hard to tell what they are. But I suppose I can see how that works.

"Do you mean to say that only those with this symbol can use forbidden magic?"

"Anyone can settle a spell...but anyone who attempts to use forbidden magic without this symbol on their body will die."

"..."

"They will feel a pain so intense it is like nothing of this world, and their veins will rupture into fountains of blood... Or so it is said," murmured Munin ominously, fixing her clothes.

Kind of sounds like the way that people die from a Paralyze and Berserk combo.

"I see. That's what you mean by 'Yes, but also no.'"

I can prepare the spell, but I'll die if I actually use it. Hmm.

"Assuming the caster will die if they don't have the mark...would the spell still activate and find its target?" I asked.

Munin was silent.

“You don’t know?”

“Unfortunately, I do not.” Munin hung her head remorsefully.

I could trade my life for one use of a forbidden magic spell. But even if I succeeded...

“So to use a forbidden magic spell, I’ll need a member of the Forbidden Words Clan who possesses that mark by my side?”

Munin swallowed. “The only remaining members of the clan who have such a mark in this village are myself and one other.”

Just two?

“And so I will accompany you.”

“I would be grateful for that...but are you sure? What of your position as chief of this village?”

“It is precisely because I am village chief that I have to do this for the future of Kurosaga.” Munin smiled, and her eyes softened. “Securing our clan’s future is the true mission of any chief.”

Her smile was warm but determined. I dropped to my knees on the spot and lowered my head.

“I thank you deeply for your bravery and swear that I will do my best to ensure that it will not be for nothing. I will bring my full force to bear on the Goddess Vicius and crush her completely.”

Munin stood up straight and folded her hands in front of her before chuckling and turning her head a little to the side.

“Say nothing of it. I offer you my sincerest gratitude.” Her smile gradually faded into a bitter grimace. “But in order to use this forbidden magic, there is one more factor that cannot be avoided.”

More complications?

“That is a *medium*.”

“A medium...”

“I am truly sorry, but a medium has never been seen in this village of ours, and...they are said to be as difficult to get ahold of as the Scrolls of Forbidden Magic themselves.”

“Have you ever seen one before?”

“I have never come into contact with one, so I cannot give you too many details regarding their whereabouts. I’m sorry...”

“There is no need for you to apologize, Munin-san.”

She looked down toward the floor, a shadow falling over her face. “Right before we came to this country, our clan received word that some had been located in the Nashuru Mountain Range in the west of the continent. Even then, mediums were extremely rare items. As to whether they are still obtainable today...”

Munin shook her head apologetically.

I see. Just reading the scrolls isn't enough to learn this forbidden magic. I'll need to get a medium—some sort of intermediary.

“Are these mediums one-time use items? Can they be used multiple times?”

“They are consumed when the spell is cast, it is said.”

Meaning we can only use this forbidden magic as many times as we have mediums to do so. It's not like some skill that you can fire off as long as you have mana. We can't afford to miss—can't take any chances when casting this thing. These are rare items then, huh?

I placed my thumb on the jaw of my mask.

“Speaking of rare items in the west...I have a good idea where they might be.”

I heard that Yonato's stockpiling rare holy relic items, and Mira's doing the same. They haven't been offering them up to the Goddess as tribute. And both of those countries are in the west, as Munin just mentioned. I hear that Yonato took serious casualties in the recent invasion—they suffered heavy losses even in their capital city. They might prove surprisingly easy to infiltrate at present.

And based on the information I got from the Sword of Courage, the older brother of the Madly Beautiful Emperor in Mira was after a divine beast, wasn't he? I'm not even sure if I can get Nyaki out of this country—and I don't want to do so unless it's completely necessary! But if Nyaki were to stay right here, could I use her existence as a bargaining chip in any negotiations?

Munin saw me thinking and added, “Please let me know if there's anything that I can do to assist you in procuring a medium. I-if you plan on journeying to find one, please allow me to accompany you. And my wings will be no issue. I'm able to make them smaller for short periods of time if need be. Oh, and...I will show you later, but those who bear

this mark also have certain special abilities...”

I raised my head to look at Munin, thumb still stuck to the bottom of my mask.

“Munin-san—what are these rare items you refer to as mediums called?”

“Blue dragonstones, I believe,” she replied.

“Hm? Blue dragon...stones?”

“Yes.”

Munin nodded and explained what they were. After she was done, for a moment I sat there in stunned silence.

There’s no doubt. I’m certain.

They’re the stones I found in the Ruins of Disposal. The skeletons of that couple who were holding hands—the pouch filled with blue dragonstones that one of them was holding. I don’t have them here with me now, but they should still be in my bag back in Zect’s citadel.

“Belzegea...?”

“I’ve got the mediums already.”

“Excuse me?”

“I have some blue dragonstones—quite a few, actually.”

“R—” Munin seemed to lose control, closing in on me and grabbing my arms with both hands. “Really—?!”

“I’m almost certain they’re the items you’ve just described.”

“I-I see...” She let go of my arms, took a step back, and let out a long breath. “Ah, my apologies. I might have become a little too excited... I had expected obtaining the blue dragonstones to be the most trying part of our journey.”

I don’t know if those two in the Ruins of Disposal brought the dragonstones down there knowing that they could be used as a medium for forbidden magic—they might have had no idea at the time.

In any case, this seems like destiny. The forbidden scrolls from the Great Sage. The feelings of all the souls who were beaten down and thrown into the Ruins of Disposal by that villainous Goddess...they’re all connected to me.

It appeared that Munin was still having trouble accepting that I

really had the blue dragonstones in my possession.

“Eh—? Incredible...” She mumbled to herself quietly, both hands on her cheeks. “Truly astounding... Is this some kind of dream...?”

...Sort of feels like those formalities of hers are breaking down a little.



It depends on how many mediums get used up with each cast...but we might be able to get some practice in, to obtain more information on the spell's range and effect before the moment of truth.

"Munin-san ..."

"Hm? S-sorry. What is it?"

"You were about to say something earlier, I believe? I'm sorry for interrupting—something about your special abilities."

"Ah, that is correct. Those with a mark similar to the one I bear on my back... Well, just allow me to show you." Munin closed her eyes and focused. Her body began to glow with light, until she was completely enveloped by it...

"Caw!" She'd transformed into a black crow. She flew in a circle around my head, then returned to the ground in front of me. "Caw."

With that, the crow started to glow, and...

"That is my power," she said as she returned to her humanoid form.

"You're able to transform into a crow?"

"Yes. This ability has been passed down through the ages, since the time of our ancestors. Though it is only for those who bear my mark."

"Can you talk while you're transformed?"

"I cannot... My apologies."

"There's no need to apologize. Your power appears to be quite useful for concealing yourself."

Easy to avoid all kinds of danger with a power like that. If some unexpected crisis hits, I could just have her transform into a crow and hide somewhere.

"With this ability, I doubt I will cause too much trouble if I accompany you on your journey."

"Fewer people on the road makes it less likely we'll get noticed."

"As I said, I can also shrink my wings when visiting human countries," said Munin, turning her back to me as if showing off. "It's rather tiring, so I can't keep it up forever...but I should be able to last several days."

“How long can you stay in your crow form?” I asked.

“Several days as well.” Munin gave me a bitter smile. “But staying transformed into a crow for that long can take a toll on me. I would need to rest after doing so.”

Sounds similar to Erika's familiar abilities.

“Interesting... Your clothes come along with you when you transform then?”

“Conveniently, I can choose whether they do or not. But when the clothes are bulky or heavy, it can increase the toll that transformation takes.”

So when she transforms she isn't going to leave all her clothes behind and be completely naked when she turns back into her regular form—that's good. Now it makes sense why her clothes are so thin and transparent in places.

“Munin-san, you haven't asked why I want to take revenge yet.”

“Do I really need to?” said Munin, smiling at me knowingly. “If you have had experience with the Goddess Vicius, I could accept any terrible story you might have to tell me. I am satisfied that you intend to get revenge against her—that is all I needed to know.”

Maybe she's being considerate too—doesn't want me to have to dredge up all those painful memories.

“Does the reason you are able to trust me have something to do with Anaorbael?”

“King Zect respects Mistress Anael from the bottom of his heart and trusts her. He has also decided that you are a person worthy of his trust. That is sufficient for me.”

Once more I saw how much Erika's influence loomed over this place.

Since entering this country, I haven't removed my mask once or told any of them my true identity. That's because of her. ...If we ever meet again, I'm going to have to repay her for all this.

“Not to mention that this fight is for the sake of our clan. If you have a solid reason to side with us against our enemy, that is sufficient.” The tone of her voice hardened. “We Kurosaga are being targeted by the Goddess. Our presence here in this country is putting its people in

danger. If they cast us out, Vicius might leave the rest of its people be. The past leaders of Kurosaga have carried this fear for generations.”

And so the Goddess must be crushed so they can live in peace—free from that worry at last.

“And yet, King Zect says he will continue to shelter our clan in his country and claims that we are his people now. People who live here and respect this country’s laws are his people, regardless of their race.”

Munin’s voice was thick with gratitude. “That is the promise of the Country at the End of the World.”

The Goddess is fixated on slaughtering the Forbidden Words Clan. I think the number of people who have this piece of information is still limited. But, well...the Immortal King Zect is a good man, pure and simple. But Munin’s right too—the Sword of Courage’s mission was to slaughter the Forbidden Words Clan at all costs. It’d only be natural for the people of this country to ask the King to banish the clan so the rest of them can live in safety. That would’ve been a real possibility in the human world.

The people who live here are too naive—too kind for their own good. I appreciate how considerate they are, it makes me think better of them, but they’re too trusting. I can’t decide whether that’s good or bad. It’d be too easy for the outside world to just eat them up.

Living out there has made Erika so suspicious of everyone, but at heart she’s a frighteningly good person. As for the people who have never experienced the outside world, though...

“It’s not just King Zect. We are looked after by all the people here,” said Munin. There was a conflicted look set on her face. “Belzegea...we will assist you in your revenge against the Goddess. I have but one favor to ask of you.”

“You’re going to meet the forces of Alion in battle to save this country, and you’d like my Lord of the Flies Brigade to participate?”

Munin looked taken aback for a moment, but soon a fleeting, wry smile crept over her face. “You read my mind, I see.”

The way she was talking about King Zect just now, it was sort of obvious.

“We will train for battle in our own way. This country has brave soldiers willing to fight for it, with the Four Shining Warriors at their head. Not all of us have lapsed into the ways of peace... We are

prepared to fight, but we still do not know much of the present conditions in the outside world.”

Sounds like a kind of mass national conscription. They must be worried whether their fighting tactics are even going to work.

“So you want us to help because we know about the outside world—and you’d like us to join you in the battle, I take it?”

“If it is not too much to ask? No... Please, I humbly ask for your assistance.” Munin bowed her head low.

“We will.”

She raised her head. “Are you sure?”

“Those forces would be an obstacle to me in due time either way,” I said.

I mean, I’d always intended to help them with the attack. I’d planned to raise that with King Zect once this business with the Forbidden Words Clan was settled. The Goddess’s forces that are closing in—I should erase them if given the chance... Much better than having them group up with another army and come after me in force later.

I want to slowly cut away at the Goddess’s power, especially this Sixth Order of Knights. Even the Sword of Courage called them strong—it’d be perfect if I could wipe them out here for good. Not to mention if they’re a part of the Thirteen Orders of Alion I might be able to get revenge for what happened to Lis’s village.

They won’t be coming in small numbers—they’re here to invade a country. There’ll be a lot of advantages to cooperating with the people of the Country at the End of the World in the battle to come. The Lord of the Flies Brigade might have trouble taking on a large army by ourselves, but it’ll be easier if we have some numbers on our side. I was actually worried that this country might not have any military strength to speak of.

“Th-thank you, Belzegea!” Munin’s beamed as she took both my hands in hers. “Let’s try our best in the battle to come!”

“My assistance comes with conditions.”

“Conditions? Y-yes... If it’s within my power of course, please state your terms.”

“You cannot participate in the battle.”

“Eh?”

I slowly pulled my hands from hers and headed toward the door.

"I cannot have you dying before you are able to cast your forbidden magic on the Goddess."

"Ah—I-I understand. If you insist, Belzegea, then I understand your worries. It would distract you to have me participating in the battle."

"It would, and I thank you for understanding. I had better inform King Zect of our discussion without delay."

"E-excuse me, but...might I ask one more question?" said Munin, stopping me as I placed a hand on the door. "H-how old are you? This isn't terribly important, of course. It's just...in our conversation I haven't been able to pinpoint your age at all."

I turned to look back at Munin over my shoulder and told her my age. Her expression was difficult to read, as if she were lost in thought.

I said my goodbyes and left, walking out into the hallway. As I turned the corner to make my way back to the front door, I heard her panicked voice once more.

"Ehh?! Impossible! That can't be true!"

Amia was still there waiting when I emerged from the village chief's house.

Napping is more like it.

She was coiled up, asleep in a comfortable ball on the ground. The lamia knight drowsily awoke and snaked back up to her full height.

With a large yawn, she asked, "All done? Things slitherin' in the right direction?"

"Looks like it."

"That's good then, yep? Let's get back to the castle."

We left the cave and Kurosaga Village behind and began to walk back through the city.

"I'd like to talk to King Zect directly if possible—could you pass on a message for me, Amia-dono?" I asked.

"Why me?" she replied.

"You're the member of the Four Shining Warriors I find it easiest to talk to."

“Heh, well of course I... W-wait a minute, you! I’m the *only* member of the Four Shining Warriors you’ve talked to, ain’t I?!”

“Yeah.”

“Jeez! The nerve!”

“But I wasn’t lying. You’re still the one I find it easiest to talk to.”

“Of course I am. Fine! Come on then, I’ll give your message to the king, yep?!”

“You have my gratitude.”

As the conversation continued, I got more information about the Four Shining Warriors.

There’s...

Amia Plum Lynx (lamia)

Cocoroniko Doran (dragonkin)

Geo Shadowblade (leopardman)

Kil Mail (centaur)

And along with these three...

Zect (Lich)

Gratrah Mellowheart (Harpy)

Liselotte Onik (Arachne)

Those seven make up the Seven Lights.

Hey... This must mean there are leopardmen here who aren’t from the Speed Clan.

And I think arachne have...the upper bodies of humans and the lower bodies of spiders, right?

Amia looked upward, squinting into the air.

“Hmm? Isn’t that...Lady Gratrah?”

I saw it now too—a single harpy flying toward us.

She’s right, that’s Gratrah. The people around here shouldn’t be that

surprised to see a harpy flying around...but everyone walking around nearby is stopping to look.

She landed before us, looking a bit ruffled and out of sorts.

Something's off.

Gratrah steadied her breathing with a few shallow gasps before speaking. "Seras Ashrain has lost consciousness—we found her collapsed."

Seras?!

"What happened?"

"She received permission from the king to tour the castle grounds. According to those present, she turned very pale and fell to the ground while looking over the allotments outside."

Did all the fatigue somehow hit her all at once? Is she sick? Or was this the work of—

"She was carried into the castle and is currently sleeping, but she appears plagued by nightmares... She speaks of a giant worm in her slumber..."

Oh, not this again.

"...I'm so sorry."

When I arrived at her bedside, I found her lying on her side, and those were the first words from her mouth. She covered her eyes with one arm, still looking a little green around the gills.

"Are you feeling better now?" I asked.

"Yes, I am now," she replied, sounding fed up with herself.

I pulled up a chair and sat beside her bed. We were in a bedroom inside the citadel. There was one bed in the center of the simple room, but other than that, there was nothing much of note. Seras and I were alone—Piggymaru, Sleil, and Nyaki were in another room. I took off my mask and placed it in my backpack.

"I hear you went to see the agricultural allotments in the castle grounds?"

"King Zect told me that I could go wherever I liked within the castle, and so...I thought it might be a good idea to gather information

about our surroundings.”

So that’s why she took Piggymaru and the others out into the grounds with her. I can only imagine...

“Crops like these can be grown underground, I see. Interesting. So Mistress Erika was the one who instructed the people of this country in using these farming techniques. I would expect nothing less from her.”

“Squee~!♪”

“Pakyu~!♪”

“Nyaki’s so surprised to see all these people, but...no humans around here!”

“In fact, it’s the first time I’ve ever seen crops such a—aaahh, a giant worm—!”

“Squeee?!”

“Pakyuu?!”

“Miss Seras?! What’s the matter?! Ahmm... Did this big worm do something to you...? Don’t worry! It’s just a worm, meow!”

“Squeeee!”

“Pakyuuuuuh!”

“Myeooow?! Miss Seras’s face is turning pale! Q-quick... Nyaki will bury him again! Meow, meow, meow... Okay! Miss Seras, Nyaki put him back in the dirt, so—Miss Seras-san?! You can’t sleep here! Miss Seras has passed out! Y-you two! Help Nyaki support her! My-yeoww!”

“—Or so I was told when I awoke,” said Seras.

She was covering her eyes with her arm, and her ears were bright red with embarrassment.

I ended up imagining that scene really vividly just now...

“What’s wrong, Seras?”

She raised the arm from her eyes and looked at me with a strange expression in her round, blue eyes.

“It’s... It’s nothing, just...”

“Eh?”

“I don’t often s-see you smile like that,” she continued sheepishly.

“Really? I’m not like Erika, am I? I smile quite a lot.”

“Of course... But the way you did just now, as if it naturally came over your face...I don’t see that often.”

“I mean, now that you mention it...”

She might be right. And maybe I shouldn’t be smiling about this right now... I just couldn’t help it, when I thought about Nyaki and the others panicking over Seras out in the castle grounds.

“Maybe you’re right,” I admitted, scratching my forehead and giving Seras a wry grin. “Sorry, I know you must’ve been scared...but I haven’t smiled that way in so long. It’s all thanks to you, Seras.”

She chuckled and smiled back at me. “I’m happy to have lightened your mood, even if just a little.”

“Actually, maybe I should be thanking the worm.”

Seras gripped the corners of her thin blanket and pulled it closer.

“I... I should thank it too, I suppose? When it comes to worms, my feelings are somewhat complex,” she said, sulking a little and looking quite sorry for herself. “Of course, I know the worm didn’t do anything wrong... But they are so... I mean... Worms are so... Well, they’re *worms*.”

It seemed that Seras was trying to find some saving grace for worm-kind, but she couldn’t manage it.

She’s even still trembling a little as she talks about them... I can see the color draining from her face.

Seras closed her eyes in self-reproach. “It’s not right... I’m the vice-captain of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, yet I am reduced to this pathetic state by a mere worm. I will do my best to overcome this fear.”

“I don’t mind things the way they are, to be honest.”

“You mean to say my aversion to worms can remain unresolved?”

“Seras Ashrain is such a perfect high elf, it’s difficult to find any flaw with her at all. You’ve got to have at least one weakness, right?” I asked, then mumbled, “Well, anyway, I think it’s kinda cute.”

“Eh—? Y-you do?”

“Maybe we should keep this a secret from that foul Goddess though. We’ll be in trouble if a little thing like a worm gets in our way at the wrong time,” I said jokingly.

Seras furrowed her brow and pouted a little determinedly. “I will do my best to conquer this fear after all.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

At least I know she’s safe now.

“Regarding our plans for the future, by the way...” I told Seras about the Forbidden Words Clan, their agreement to help us, and the upcoming battle with the Goddess’s forces. After it was done, I stood up to leave—Seras propped herself up in bed with one arm and looked up at me with a concerned expression on her face.

“We’re finally here, aren’t we.”

“All we have is a way to break the Goddess’s Dispel Bubble, but... yeah. We’re here, preparations complete,” I said, putting on my Lord of the Flies mask. “For now, we just have to crush the pawns she sent to kill the Forbidden Words Clan.”

“The strongest and most famed knights of the Thirteen Orders of Alion...the Sixth Order.”

“At least for now, yeah.”

“I have heard in the past of their strength in battle—though as I once told you, I have never met with them face to face.”

Lewin Seale talked about them too. Didn’t seem too fond of them based on his tone either—I don’t think they got along.

“The Thirteen Orders aren’t really loved by the people of Alion, are they?”

“They are not. While some of this I am sure you have heard before...” Seras began to explain. “The leaders of the Thirteen Orders of Alion have always belonged to the noble family of the baron. But only the First Order is full of the second and third sons of noblemen. The

other twelve orders contain soldiers with...less-than-honorable pasts. Those are the rumors, at least.”

Mercenaries with chips on their shoulders. Bullies. Criminals. That lines up with what the Sword of Courage told me.

“Each of the individual orders has a strong independent streak, and the orders themselves vary in size,” Seras continued.

“Some of them are large armies, and others are small groups of elites, huh?”

“Yes, that appears to be the case. They also refuse to listen to any orders except those that come from the Goddess herself. They do not even obey the King of Alion.”

“So just like the Sword of Courage, it’s like Vicius raised them herself.”

She managed to control those humanoid-type monsters. I wouldn’t be too surprised if the Sixth Order of Knights turned out to be an army of Vicius’s homemade brainwashed soldiers...

“So...the strongest of them are the Sixth Order, right? You mentioned that all you really know about their leader is his name?” I asked.

These are foreign affairs for Seras, can’t blame her for not knowing everyone’s names.

“Those who have met him in person describe him as a normal man—completely ordinary. He does not leave a strong impression on others.”

“So he doesn’t stand out, even as the captain of a famous order of knights ...”

It almost sounds like he’s doing it on purpose—playing a role. Just like somebody I used to know...acting the background character.

“You said nobody knows his full name either, right? What was it...Johndoe?”

“Yes.”

“In any case, we can’t afford to be complacent.”

If it turns out the guy’s weaker than we expected...well, that’s fine. But it’s dangerous to assume your enemies are weak from the outset. Those who underestimate their enemies and judge them to be insignificant—I know

where guys like that end up.

“I’m going to go see King Zect,” I said, turning my back to Seras.

“Shall I come with you?”

“Nah, we’ve arranged to talk in private—just the two of us.”

“Understood. I will have to go and greet Chief Munin personally in the near future.”

“I thought she was a bit too serious at first, but she’s actually pretty easy to talk to. I think you two’ll be able to get along. See you later...” I remembered another question as I touched the doorknob. “About our sleeping situation...are you okay with us staying in the same room? It’d make things easier if we’re together.”

“As long as you don’t mind sharing a bed,” said Seras, laughing and giving me a wicked little smile.

“All right, then.”

“Eh?! Ah, y-yes. Th-then let us share.”

“...Huh, so you really wanted to sleep with me then?”

“Well, ehm...” Seras pulled up the covers with both hands in embarrassment, hiding half her face and looking away. “Yes...I do think...I-I would like to share.”

“Would’ve been a bit of a shock to me if you’d turned me down, you know?”

“Despite how it may appear, I am always being serious.”

“All right, good,” I said, closing the door and heading off to wait for King Zect.

I spoke to King Zect of my intention to take Munin and leave the country.

“Understood. I accept this situation between you and Munin.”

“Allow me to thank you once again. My negotiations with Kurosaga only went so smoothly because of your kind assistance and influence.”

“If you wish to thank anyone, it should be Mistress Erika.”

“I intend to. But I wished to thank you too. And, well—Munin

agreed to assist me on one condition. The Lord of the Flies Brigade will assist you in confronting the encroaching armies of the Goddess.”

King Zect’s reaction was not what I expected.

“H-hmm...” He gripped his skull with what looked like anguish.

“Is something wrong, King Zect?”

“After you left for the Kurosaga Village, we of the Seven Lights assembled here for a meeting. Our intentions are...to negotiate with the forces of the Goddess.”

Negotiations?

“You believe she can be reasoned with?”

“At first I thought we should ambush her, but during the meeting...” King Zect stopped, seemingly at a loss for words.

“One of the Seven Lights suggested negotiating with the Goddess during your meeting?” I asked.

“...Yes. Prime Minister Liselotte was strongly insistent that we resolve the conflict through peaceful means. She’s a finer speaker than any of the other Seven Lights.”

The Seven Lights—but isn’t the Immortal King Zect himself the leader?

“The prime minister has more influence than even the king himself?”

King Zect nodded a little sheepishly. “It has been a long time since our country was last at war. The ones most valued in this peaceful nation of ours are those skilled in domestic affairs and developing new technology. The arachnes have been the center of our society, supporting those efforts since generations past. The Onik Clan’s members especially have been elected as prime ministers for years now. They hold a privileged position here.”

The technology that Erika gave this country... So the Onik Clan are the ones who have overseen and supported its development.

“I have lived long, but I am no skilled warrior—nor have I any great personal strength. I have stayed locked in this place so long...I have little knowledge of the outside world to speak of. I am no longer the one who truly runs this country.”

The immortal king... The one who never dies. But that doesn’t mean he can never grow old. Humans are the same. Just because someone’s lived a

long time, doesn't make them superior to people who're younger than they are. The King might be able to stay mentally fit and active forever, but the abilities he once had must have started to deteriorate.

"Of course... You require fit subordinates to support you in your work, I take it?"

"Exactly right. I pass on my responsibilities to those capable of fulfilling them. It must be the same in your world, no? No king can rule alone and expect his country to function."

He's right. But if the prime minister has more power than the king himself, then...

"Do the other Seven Lights agree with the prime minister's position?" I asked.

"Tomorrow we will meet again to decide. It is a decision that will shape this country's future. We require a night to think it over."

I placed a hand to my chin and looked down, sitting in silence for a moment, before asking, "What is your personal opinion on the matter?"

"I want to leave the decision to the other Seven Lights to make. Yet..." King Zect paused for a moment before continuing. "I believe it's time we made some connections to the outside world. In the not-so-distant future, we will need to open ourselves up to them."

I waited quietly for King Zect's next words.

"To be frank, there is another problem confronting our nation at present." He sighed. "The danger of starvation."

"The people of this country can't supply themselves with enough to eat?"

King Zect nodded wearily. "With the techniques and ancient magic tools we received from Mistress Erika, we have managed to make it this far. But our population is increasing, and one of the magical devices that supports our food production is reaching the end of its life span. There are few in this country who know of this fact..."

"Then you need to expand your borders so you can grow food outside?"

"Indeed. That's why I..." he hesitated.

"That's why you want to resolve this issue peacefully. So the

people of the outside world don't see your country as hostile or potentially dangerous enemies."

"Yes. That is why I was so taken by Lise's proposal. To do battle against a group of humans while our country finally takes its first steps back into the larger world... It would send entirely the wrong message."

I understand the logic behind that view, and their feelings about the matter. But even King Zect himself doesn't look sure.

"But you have your doubts?"

"Indeed... The Goddess's presence is the issue. Those followers of hers are closing in on our nation. I worry that they won't respond peacefully to our attempts to negotiate with them..."

"I don't think it's likely they'll be friendly," I said.

"Is that so, Sir Belzegea?"

"Especially those that are currently on their way... I can't imagine the Thirteen Orders of Alion responding to a request for friendship."

"I see..." King Zect sighed despondently. "And yet, as I said, I do not know their hearts. I will hope against hope... Hope that sincere discussion can change their minds."

"Those are just my personal feelings. I've got no right to decide the future of this country. If you do choose to confront them though, I'll fight alongside you. And...there are individuals riding with them that I really do want to destroy."

"...For what reason?"

"Vengeance for someone dear to me."

They're the ones who destroyed Lis's village. Not to mention they're here to kill the Forbidden Words Clan. I have to crush them. But this time around, there's no question they've got the numbers on us. We won't be able to fight them with the Lord of the Flies Brigade alone. If we were to take Munin and run, the rest of the Kurosaga left here would surely be killed in the invasion. Munin wants to save the Kurosaga—that's why she's helping us—so we can't leave the rest of the Country at the End of the World to burn while we escape before the attack hits. There's Nyaki to think about too. We have to protect these people.

What should I do?

Should I lead Nyaki and the rest of the Kurosaga Clan out of the

country?

But how could I in such numbers?

I'm not being realistic here. If tomorrow the Seven Lights do decide to resolve this with peaceful negotiations, that'll put me in a pretty tough spot. But I also just can't imagine peace talks ever working out in this situation.

My mind was racing.

“Sir Belzegea...?”

“King Zect.”

“Y-yes?”

“Can I ask you to summon the Seven Lights back here for another meeting?”

I don't know anything about this prime minister yet, but for starters we should talk face to face. No matter how this plays out, that's my first move.

YASU TOMOHIRO

WITH THE COMING of the Demon King armies, some monsters had taken the opportunity to attack humans and hide out in the forest near a place they called the Country at the End of the World. Yasu Tomohiro had been tasked by the Goddess to end this cowardly threat to humanity.

“...Oh, and recruit the Lord of the Flies Brigade while I'm at it, I suppose,” muttered Yasu as he sat astride his horse, traveling with the Sixth Order of Knights. He rode alone, some way ahead of all the rest.

I think they said we're almost halfway between Ulza and Alion by now? Hmph, that Goddess is far too weak. She wants to rely on some unknown group of cursed-magic users when there are brilliant heroes like me around?

Yasu couldn't stand them—especially their leader, Belzegea. To add insult to injury, Yasu had even heard he had the most beautiful woman on the continent at his side.

The women here are the epitome of idiocy. Most of them are no doubt just simple, stupid girls who are easily moved by their emotions.

Inexcusable...! I saw a portrait of this Seras Ashrain during my time in Alion. Her appearance was...exceptional. I must grant her that. Her figure... I can hardly award her full marks, but I do admit she passes the test. Her waist... I had always pictured elves as skinny creatures, but this one had some meat on her in certain places. Not to mention her chest. The sort of breasts that can attract men, and she seemed less than modest...but I suppose I can compromise on that.

According to some of Yasu's classmates who had seen her do battle, she was even more impressive in person. Yasu bit his lower lip.

What the hell... She's basically a heroine. It's not right. She should've met me first, not him. But if I kill him, things will naturally fall into the proper place.

The Goddess had given Yasu a condition on his secret mission. If Belzegea were to refuse to join, Yasu had been ordered to eliminate him. His mouth twisted into a smile.

I won't even try to recruit him. A simple work-around! I'll kill that Lord of the Flies...burn him to ashes! I can simply pretend to recruit him, get him isolated and alone...then burn him up! I can say that Belzegea was jealous of my incredible powers and suddenly tried to attack me. I...I had to defend myself! Stand my ground...

What is this idea? It's too perfect! The perfect scenario! That's why I'm one of the few heroes who actually uses their brains in battle. Kirihara, Oyamada, Ayaka, and the Takao sisters...we're made of different stuff. Hijiri, well, she has certain good qualities, but Kirihara and Ayaka and their ilk...

The annoyance suddenly began to build up inside him, and Yasu's legs started to tremble against the flanks of his mount.

Simpletons! They're awful! Easy fights that are simply tests of brawn only work to the benefit of idiots like Kirihara and Ayaka with all their points in their attack skills. It's pathetic that those are the only skills they're able to muster... How it vexes me! They're only at the forefront because they got lucky, nothing more. It's not true power.

That Battle for the White Citadel just wasn't the right time or place for me to shine, that's all. How useless I must have looked...how unfortunate! Ugh, it's so idiotic! The world is full of utter morons!

Yes. A little coaxing, and Seras Ashrain will surely rush to my side. She was heartless enough to abandon her country in its time of need, after

all...

"Let us rest here for a while, shall we?" came a voice, which was normal as normal could be. A black-haired man of middling height and middling build rode up behind Yasu.

Normal. Normal. Normal. A bundle of averages this one... The embodiment of a lack of personality. I suppose the only thing notable about him is the way he speaks.

Yasu turned and looked with disdain at the captain of the Sixth Order, Johndoe.

That fool didn't work his way up the ranks—he's the spoiled child of some rich lord, bathing in the light of his parents' glory. Doesn't look strong at all. Hah! Alion would be nothing without us heroes! It's all so foolish!

"Resting already then... My, my, how frail you are."

"My deepest apologies. Unlike the Honorable Hero of the Black Inferno, we are but normal human beings. I humbly beg your forgiveness."

That fawning attitude of his pisses me off.

They tied their horses, and Yasu joined the rest of the Sixth Order around a campfire. In its center was a large pot, where the men began boiling their supper—the enticing scent of a hot meal rose from within. Yasu sat alone—it was clear to see that he was the only one who wasn't a part of the group. He cackled and smiled in a self-satisfied way. In the past, he would've felt awkward in situations like these, but he was no longer the boy he once was.

I'm a hero now—one whose strength the Goddess needs. Captain of the Sixth Order? Well, I suppose he must have some power...but he's no match for an A-class such as myself. Still, his lack of respect is vexing.

"Lævateinn."

He activated his unique skill, and his right hand was wreathed in flame. It startled Johndoe, who had been reaching for the spoon in the pot above their shared campfire.

"I-is something the matter?"

"Nothing... I simply wished to see flames," said Yasu. "If my flames scared you...I apologize."

"I-it was quite a shock... Is that your unique skill, honorable

hero?”

“Supreme.”

“Hm?”

“I’m a supreme hero. Don’t mix me in with the rest of that lot... and don’t ever make that mistake again, you insolent fool.”

Johndoe placed the spoon back in the pot and practically got down on his knees to apologize. “Please forgive my rudeness!”

Yasu stood up straight.

“Are you sure that you’re the strong captain the rumors speak of? Hm?” Yasu stepped on the back of Johndoe’s head, pushing his forehead down into the dirt. He began to feel hostile glares directed toward him from all sides—he turned his head to scan their faces. “What? Don’t tell me...you think you can beat an A-class hero, do you?”

His right hand was still burning with black flame.

“I think it’s about time I made some things clear. There is a gap in strength between me and all of you here—a terrifyingly wide gap. If you don’t understand that now...” He held his flaming hand out toward the knights. “I wonder if you will after I’ve turned a few of you to ash?”

“Y-you...!” A male covered in pink fur closed in on Yasu with anger in his eyes. He was about as tall as that loser Oyamada and had an insolent and tactless expression to him—to say nothing of his pink, beast-like ears and tail.

“You’re that divine beast or whatever they call you, no? Plucky, I’ll grant you that. What do they call you?”

“Captain?!” The divine beast ignored Yasu’s question and called out to Johndoe. “Why’re you just lettin’ this guy walk all over you?! This guy ain’t nothin’ to be scared of! In the battle, he got a few o’ his freakin’ fingers cut off by some monster and ran the heck away from the fighting the first chance he got! This guy’s a weaklin’!”

Yasu lifted his foot from the back of Johndoe’s head and swept his right arm around behind him as he turned. “You... You insolent fool!”

The black flames rushed at the divine beast.

“Ghhaa?! Wh-what the heck?! S-stop!” The divine beast tried to dodge the flames as they wrapped around him.

“Worry not...I won’t kill you. Divine beasts are precious, no? Be

thankful for that or you would have already been burned to death. But, well...I cannot let insolence like that slide! Perhaps my flames will teach you your place!”

Suddenly the vice-captain was there, in between Yasu and the flame-wrapped divine beast. “C’mon, man, this’s too much, yeah? Give’m a break.”

He was a tall and rugged man with untidy golden hair that was swept back but still came down in strands over his forehead. His eyes looked perpetually tired, but his gaze was sharp and piercing. His stern attitude combined with the lazy drawl made Ferenoch Darden a uniquely unsettling person. Now the vice-captain of the Sixth Order looked down at Yasu with an intimidating stare, his hand gripping the hilt of his sword.

“Hmph...” Yasu had seen through the ruse the moment he met them.

This guy’s way more of a captain than that run-of-the-mill Johndoe down there. That guy is only captain because of some family connection. I knew it. The real leader of the Sixth Order is this man. Well, if I can just prove that I am above Ferenoch, the others will fall in line soon enough.

“Why don’t we settle this now? Find out who’s fit to stand above the other. I’m ready to fight if you are. I won’t stop you if you try to flee from the Hero of the Black Inferno. But that would be total defeat for you.”

“Captain...” said Ferenoch, keeping his glare firmly fixed on Yasu.

“L-let us have no more of this!” cried Johndoe, getting to his feet. He then turned to Yasu and lowered his head deeply. “In light of my position as captain of this order, I humbly ask that you forgive Feronoch and Radice’s impudence! I beg of you, supreme hero, please!”

“C’mon now, Cap—”

“Ferenoch.” Johndoe silenced his vice-captain with a single word. Ferenoch fell silent and withdrew a few steps back.

But the divine beast Radice had his fur singed in several places and was still angrily shouting at Yasu. “Captain...?! I don’t get it! What the heck’s happenin’ here?!”

“Radice.”

The divine beast fell silent.

Yasu tilted his head to the side. Johndoe had just called out to Radice, not in an intimidating manner—yet Radice stopped his wailing immediately and reluctantly took a step backward.

There's something wrong with these guys... How can they be scared of a nobody like Johndoe?

Yasu detested them from the bottom of his heart.

“You’re embarrassing to look at,” said Yasu, saying what he thought out loud to their faces.

I can say whatever I think now. I can do that because I’m strong. Because I’m a supreme hero.

“*Muah hah hah...* This man is weaker than you, but you cannot defy him because of his noble station, can you?! *Hah hah hah!* What pathetic weaklings!” Yasu was filled with joy, ecstatic. “But, well, there’s nothing else for you, is there?! You have to flatter and bow to the strong to survive! Relying on we Heroes from Another World to save you—weaklings! So weak!”

This feels great...! This is it...! The privilege of the truly strong. These weaklings must stay quiet and let me do whatever I want with them.

“Now then, what’ll it be?! I’ve been acknowledged by the Goddess herself as a level above the others and given an important mission! This world needs me! So what exactly do you want to do to me?! *Muah hah hah!*”

It’s just like in the old world. Only the strong have the right to speak. Only the strong have the right ideas. And those here before me can do nothing but seethe and cope!

I’ve turned it around. Turned my life around completely. Those unsightly fools aren’t here anymore either.

That fallen loser Oyamada never had anything going for him but brawn to begin with!

That poser Kiriara, arrogant and full of himself!

Those weird sisters with their high-and-mighty looks!

That meddling class rep, who only survived by luck and is always lost in her dumb ideals!

“Without the Hero of the Black Inferno, we will never be able to defeat the Demon King! The mission I am about to carry out would be

impossible without my strength! The Goddess understands that more than anyone else! That's why she chose me! She's smart...I always knew it! Without Yasu Tomohiro, the Demon King would just annihilate the lot of you, and that would be the end of it! Get this through your skulls: you will never be saved without my help!"

The men were silent.

"Never let this lesson slip your minds, weaklings!"

TAKAO ITSUKI

“SEEMS LIKE what happened between you and the class rep is really makin' the rounds, Aneki.”

“Just as planned.”

Takao Itsuki was once again in Hijiri's room. The time she spent alone with her beloved older sister was irreplaceable to Itsuki, no matter where they happened to find themselves.

“But, like, don't you think maybe you went kinda overboard goin' for a kiss in front of everyone like that? Like, I never expected her not to resist...”

“I intended it as a little extra push, to ensure the rumors did not die as they tend to.”

“...The class rep was, like, super flustered afterward, y'know?”

For a brief fraction of a moment, Hijiri showed a rare flash of remorse. “You're right. Perhaps I have wronged Sogou-san. I was thankful for her natural reaction to my advance, of course, but still...”

“Hey, if she was focusing too much on the acting, it'd come off as suspicious, right? But you did tell her that

you were only pretending, and she didn't have to go through with it, didn't you?” asked Itsuki.

“I told her to go along with what I was doing, but...perhaps I should have explained further.”

It sounds like Hijiri expected her to come up with some reason and refuse... But it looked like Ayaka decided to just go through with the kiss...

“Hey, Itsuki...” Hijiri placed a hand to her mouth, looking contemplative.

“Eh?”

“I don’t care at all who my first kiss happens to have been with, but you don’t suppose that was Sogou-san’s first, do you, perchance?”

“Like, yeah. Might’ve been.”

Hijiri gave a shallow sigh. “Then what I did was doubly wrong. I don’t know if she’ll accept, but I shall be sure to apologize to her later. It was an accident—but one brought on by my own lack of explanation. I bear the blame for it.”

“Hmm, maybe... To me, it looked like the class rep just kinda freaked out and went with the flow, y’know...?”

“Well, if she did ‘freak out,’ as you put it, the blame for her doing so still lies with me. Especially with the way the incident unfolded. I didn’t expect her to become so panicked by the situation.” Itsuki’s older sister was normally better about paying attention to those sorts of details.

“Still, Aneki, you’re so good at getting people in the palm of your hand, aren’tcha—?”

“Perhaps I have a promising career ahead of me as a con artist.”

“Don’t joke. I can imagine you really succeeding there,” said Itsuki. She leaned her chair back and stared up at the ceiling “But I do feel bad for the class rep, y’know. Seems like Vicius has really got it in for her. Man, I hate that Goddess.”

“Her type is obsessed with the past. They hold on to grudges and never let go.”

“Ugh.. I can’t stand people like that, yeesh. Long as the other person’s sorry, then, like, it’s all water under the bridge, yeah?”

“Well, I’m sure that’s not her only aim.”

“What do you mean? I thought she was being mean just ’cause she hates the class rep.”

“Perhaps the Goddess believes that breaking her spirit will make Sogou-san easier to manipulate.”

“You think so? Savage.”

“It’s much easier to control someone’s mind when they’re mentally and physically exhausted. Perhaps this is how she has always done it—manipulating the heroes she summons into becoming puppets under her direction.”

“Break ’em down and brainwash ’em... Is she really a God, y’think?”

“I’m rather surprised by Sogou-san’s strength in the face of such adversity. Her will is far stronger than I had imagined. At first, I was intending to watch over her and help when the opportunity arose. But now...” Hijiri could see through just about anything, but she’d missed an aspect of her classmate’s character.

Perhaps there are other classmates who have more to them than first meets Hijiri’s eyes, huh?

“I was, like, surprised by how strong she is. Isn’t the class rep in a whole dimension of her own now? Like, she’s gone from an S-class hero all the way up into, like...a whole ’nother level or something, I feel like...”

“Someday, her presence might be the key to this battle of ours.” Hijiri placed a finger gently on her lips and softened them into a smile. “If my attempts at seduction are capable of taking her, then maybe I should try my best to do so while I still have the chance?”

Itsuki swallowed, completely captivated by the expression on her sister’s face.

Aneki’s attempts at seduction...?

Itsuki couldn’t even imagine what that would involve. She knew that her older sister was only joking, but she was a little interested in seeing how the situation would play out in reality. Itsuki rubbed her lower lip with her little finger twice. In response, Hijiri did the same, rubbing her lower lip in the exact same way.

This was one of the signals they had agreed to use. Hijiri’s unique skill Wind was more flexible in its use than she had first thought. It was capable of detecting when someone was nearby—picking up on the slightest changes in air pressure to alert her to their presence. Its range was quite wide, and she could tell when someone was listening at their door. The signal Itsuki had just given by touching her lower lip was asking Hijiri if anybody was currently listening in on them. If somebody was, Hijiri would rub her upper lip. If nobody was spying on them, she

would rub her lower lip to convey that all was clear. They had already used these signals together countless times before.

She rubbed her lower lip—no need for any fake conversation.

“So, Aneki... What about that *other thing* we talked about?” said Itsuki, lowering her voice just in case.

“I’ll need to speak with the Goddess one-on-one first. We’ll plan our next moves from there.”

“You’re gonna talk to the Goddess?”

“I need real evidence.”

“All right. You don’t want me to do anything yet?”

“I do not. Keep on as usual for the time being.”

“Okay.”

Itsuki hated the Goddess, but she also thought of her as a kind of strange, unknowable thing. To say she wasn’t afraid of her would be a lie, but Itsuki always had Hijiri by her side to keep her negativity in check. There were some who saw how closely Itsuki stuck to her big sister’s side, and who thought she was too purely in love with her sister to see anything but her brilliance.

Well, they aren’t wrong, I guess.

“I’ll follow you no matter what, Aneki,” Itsuki straightened her back and turned to look at her sister, leaning forward a little. She spoke as she always did, the same feelings in her heart as had been there all along. “Even if it means facing down that Goddess.”

“Thank you. I have a fine little sister, don’t I?”

Heh...

Sogou Ayaka’s so strong, it’s like she’s from a different dimension. But Hijiri’s from, like, a whole different world as well. If they teamed up together, with Sogou’s fighting abilities and Hijiri’s brain, I feel like they could do anything.

Itsuki and Hijiri both sat thinking in silence until the older Takao sister spoke. “Itsuki, what do you think a divine is?”

“Huh?”

“How much do you think the people of this world know about the Goddess and the divines, I wonder?”

“Hmm... Guess I’d never, like, really thought about it.”

“Even in the closed stacks, I’ve barely been able to find anything written of the divines. No one I’ve spoken to seems to know anything, either.”

“Guess now that you mention it, what is that Goddess anyway—?”

She isn’t a God like we imagine it. I mean, she’s got like a physical body, and she talks and stuff...

“Perhaps they have preconceived notions of what a divine should be,” said Hijiri.

“Eh?”

“Take the preconceived notion that there is only one divine, for example...”

“You think there might be more than one?”

“At present I can only speak of possibilities. But there were so *few* texts mentioning the divines, the information was conspicuous by its absence,” Hijiri continued, her back straight and posture beautiful as always.

“So...you think the Goddess has, like, burned all the books about them or somethin’?”

“I cannot discount the possibility. If that happens to be the case, what else do you think that might suggest?”

Itsuki gave it some thought. “Hmm... Like, maybe the other divines were a problem for the Goddess?”

“Yes. That seems rather likely.”

“But, Aneki, if the divines are really still out there somewhere, what’cha think they’re doing? Just letting the Goddess do, like, whatever she wants?!”

“I don’t think that’s the only conclusion one can draw from this situation.”

“You don’t?” To Itsuki, it seemed that the Goddess Vicius really did have her run of the continent.

“Don’t you think there’s something odd about that Goddess and this world we’re in?”

“...I-I dunno.”

Studying at school was simple. Itsuki prepared for her classes, did the revisions she had to, and got high marks on all her tests. Her grades weren't as good as Hijiri's, of course, but they were still near the top of the class.

But Itsuki was no good with the kinds of questions that her sister was asking her now. Hijiri could see patterns, and Itsuki couldn't. She found herself trapped between two conflicting feelings—the pain of not being able to see the same world that her big sister could and a deep respect for Hijiri's ability to do so nonetheless.

“The Goddess has lived in this world for centuries.”

“Yeah, she's like a grandma!”

“Hm, in any case...”

“Sorry,” said Itsuki sinking in her chair gloomily.

“Well, that is actually one of your better points I think, Itsuki.”

Hijiri never gets angry at times like these.

As Itsuki struggled to regain her composure and sit back up, Hijiri continued.

“It seems there are other species in this world with long life spans, but all have vanished from the political center stage. This Forbidden Witch character, for instance.”

“So it's just the Goddess who's still around, livin' way too long in the spotlight?”

“It would appear.”

“But, like, what's *odd* about that?”

“The nations on this continent are divided—they have yet to unify as one.”

“So...what does that mean?”

“Listen closely. The Goddess has powerful pawns at her disposal in the form of us, the Heroes from Another World. It also says in the records that some heroes have been known to remain here in the past, even after the root of all evil's defeat. In essence, it's possible the Goddess was able to use those past heroes' power to invade the other nations.”

“...Ahhh.”

I see. Like, now I get it.

Living so long gives you a big advantage over everyone else. Suppose there's some talented human king—they're eventually going to die long before the Goddess does. Then there's us heroes, who get so freakin' powerful when we level up. Strong enough to defeat that root of all evil things, even. Wouldn't it be, like, super easy for the Goddess to use them to invade other countries?

“Even just looking at the state of the continent as it stands today, it's strange. This *Sacred Alliance* they've formed to band together and fight the root of all evil is so irrational.”

“Yeah... They should, like, all just be one country instead of forming some alliance, right? The Goddess is super powerful, and she has all these powerful heroes who do what she says... Seems like she should be able to take over the whole continent, huh?”

“And yet, she does not.”

“But what's that mean...?”

“We can speculate that there is some reason she cannot do so.”

“Aneki, do you already have an idea about, like, what it might be?”

“It's mere speculation, but perhaps there are rules concerning what matters the divines are capable of meddling in.”

Itsuki sat quietly listening to her sister speak.

“There might be a kind of monitoring or evaluation system somewhere. Something that means there's a downside to divines interfering too much in affairs with their own powers. But one that can be avoided by coercing others to do their work for them.” Hijiri spoke aloud to herself, as if organizing her thoughts, laying them out one by one.

“Yes... When her actions are in line with the goal of defeating that root of all evil, the Goddess seems to be able to move somewhat freely. But when it comes to other matters, the system is stopping her somehow. She cannot change too much about the political leadership of this continent. Perhaps she has been walking a fine line, right up against the edge of what's acceptable behavior for her position, all this time?”

“So the Goddess can't just do whatever she wants?” asked Itsuki.

Hijiri nodded. "I expect the Goddess doesn't want any of the other divines interfering with her plans. If any of the others were to intervene and trigger that monitoring system that's holding them all in check..." Hijiri turned her sharp eyes away and stared off quietly into the nothingness. "That might just be her Achilles' heel."

TAKAO HIJIRI

"I'M SO SORRY to have kept you waiting, Hijiri-san.♪"

The Goddess sat down on the leather-clad sofa opposite Takao Hijiri. The two were separated by a low table in the drawing room.

It seemed that the Goddess had a number of rooms in the castle reserved for her own private use. Hijiri had noticed she had been incredibly busy of late, and it had taken a long time for them to arrange a meeting together. Ever since the Demon King's forces had started to make real moves across the continent, she was told that the Goddess hadn't had a moment's rest. In addition, there was Mira's declaration of war to contend with. Their recent "rebellion" came as a complete shock to the citizens of Alion.

"It's quite rare of you to call on me, Hijiri-san, no? Will your beloved little sister not be joining us today?"

"No, today I have come alone."

"I see. What can I do for you, then?"

"There are several matters for which I seek clarification." Hijiri approached the Goddess humbly, with a tone in her voice like an office secretary speaking to their superior. "First, I wish to ask the next course of action the heroes are to take."

"If that is all...then are you sure the other S-class heroes should not be joining us in this discussion? That sensible and energetic class rep of yours, for one?"

"I believe you understand exactly what that would entail, Goddess."

"*Oh ho.*♪" Vicius's smile widened, and she clapped her hands together. "I just knew it, Hijiri-san. You are exactly the hero I expected

you to be.”

“You mean to imply that...as 2-C stands, I would be capable of controlling the class to some extent?”

“My, my... Am I wrong, perchance?”

“I will not deny it.”

“Right? Ah, one moment please.” The Goddess stood, walked over to a nearby cabinet and took out two silver cups. Holding a bottle in one hand and the cups in the other—she returned, placed everything on the table, and poured until both cups were full to the brim.

“Please enjoy. It’s totona water.”

“Thank you very much,” Hijiri thanked the Goddess but didn’t take the cup immediately. Vicius, on the other hand, happily gulped down the water she had just poured herself.

“In the past you have...*snapped* at me before, have you not? I believe you felt my decision not to assign a mentor to Sogou-san’s group was unfair, or some other such nonse—my apologies, *suggestion*, I believe?”

“And I am very grateful to you for reconsidering and assigning Sogou-san a teacher.”

“Not at all! If you have to thank anybody, let it be the Dragonslayer who so suddenly offered himself up for the position. Ah, but now all that pushing herself too hard has ended in disaster, and she’s in quite the sorry state, isn’t she? I feel so sorry for her, truly. It’s as if it’s all some cruel joke.”

“Why do you bring this up now?”

“*Oho ho ho*, I know. I just found out, you see. You’ve had deep romantic feelings for Sogou-san all along, haven’t you? It does rather explain your rash behavior back then.”

Hijiri neatly pressed her thighs together and lowered her head as she spoke to the Goddess. “I am very sorry for what I said that day. I thought I would attract her attention by speaking up. I was carried away by my emotions.”

“Well, there’s nothing to be done about it now. At first, I felt such a terrible aching in my chest, wondering why you had forgotten your place and spoken out so cruelly against me. But, well...when I see that

it was for love, I can do naught but accept it. Simple and stupid, but for such a wonderful reason. What else can I do but forgive you?"

"I'm grateful for your leniency in this matter."

"And perhaps I was somewhat abrasive after I failed to properly interpret your actions. Let's work together, shall we, just the two of us? My dear, aren't you thirsty? Shall I have your drink taken away?" The Goddess smiled as she gestured to Hijiri's untouched silver cup.

"I will drink when I am thirsty."

"Is that so? Incidentally, Hijiri-san..." The Goddess stood up from her sofa and disappeared through an open door at the far end of the room. When she returned, she was carrying a large, thick cloth sack in her hands. It looked a little like a sleeping bag—the top was tied tight with string to keep whatever was inside from getting out. "Would you mind moving those cups to the edge of the table?"

Hijiri did as she was asked.

"Thank you." Vicius placed a hand to the strings of the sleeping bag as she held it over her shoulder. With quick movements, she chopped down with her hand, and the thread fell away.

A blackened corpse fell out of the bag and onto the table with a thump, sending a little black soot up into the air. The body was in an awful state, barely recognizable as human. Hijiri couldn't even tell the gender of the person lying on the table before her, let alone who the corpse used to be. Her expression was unchanged—the Goddess, for her part, kept smiling as well.

"Who is this, Goddess?"

"Interested, are you?"

"Yes."

"It's Nyantan."

Hijiri sat silently.

"You haven't seen her of late, have you? This is why. It's so unfortunate, isn't it... How sorry I feel for her."

"Why did this happen?"

"It appears she was in contact with somebody, and she made some rather unfortunate decisions. Perhaps she might have even been connected to Mira somehow... Ah, how sad this makes me feel."

“I see.”

“She was so pretty and considerate...strong and talented.” The Goddess let out a feigned sob. “This world is too cruel! Death can come so suddenly.”

“Yes, perhaps the world is cruel after all.”

Now it was the Goddess’s turn to fall silent.

“Is something wrong?”

“...You’re a strange person, Hijiri.”

“Am I?”

“*Oh ho...* Most normal people would be more surprised to have a blackened corpse suddenly appear before them, would they not? And you knew Nyantan once, of course.”

“What is *normal*?” asked Hijiri.

“Hmm? What’s this now?”

“According to your definition, Goddess, it would have been *normal* of me to react with surprise upon seeing this corpse. But some humans do not let their feelings of shock rise to the surface. According to your rule, they are not *normal* and therefore irregular. But this is exactly what we would refer to as diversity, is it not? Humans are diverse creatures, and that is *normal* in my view.”

“Hmm... I find the less intelligent a person is, the more they tend to enjoy such annoyingly minute distinctions—in your world as well as ours, I see.”

“Perhaps so.”

“Hijiri-san.”

“Yes?”

“You have passed the test.”

The Goddess swept the corpse from the table and sent it rolling to the floor.

“To be perfectly frank, that blackened corpse was not Nyantan,” said Vicius, sweeping the soot from the table. “It was the daughter of a corrupt noble family who had already been sentenced to death. *Oh ho ho ho*, did it surprise you?”

“I too am human. It relieves me to hear that my acquaintance is

still alive.”

The Goddess smiled broadly but brought her hands together in an apologetic pose. “I am ever so sorry. In all honesty, I intended to test you. Ah, but the part about Nyantan’s recent movements being of concern to me is true. You haven’t seen her of late as I have her dispatched to the north, into the company of the White Wolf Riders.”

“Do you have some reason to doubt me?”

“Not at all! If anyone ever uses my lovely Nyantan for any underhanded purposes, I do intend on using such methods to flush them out...but it appears you are not of that sort, Hijri-san.”

“Is there something you find suspicious about her recent actions?”

“Hmm...no. I don’t believe she has betrayed me. But...how should I put this? I believe she might have been taken in and manipulated by the honeyed words of some other party, perhaps. Of course, eliminating Nyantan would not quite be the correct response in such a situation.”

“You believe that whoever is using her would react in an abnormal manner to seeing her corpse, I take it?”

“Correct. Upon seeing your reaction, I have full confidence that you are not the culprit, Hijiri-san. You have passed. I also rather appreciate your caution in not drinking the toinoa water I set out earlier. I believe you are someone I could build a *cooperative* relationship with.” The Goddess’s expression remained unchanged, but her smile was now dyed black. “I would like to appoint you as a Disciple of Vicius.”

“Please allow me some time to consider.”

“Eh? Oh my, is that a no? That saddens me terribly to hear.”

“You were never anticipating an enthusiastic and immediate reply from Takao Hijiri, were you?”

“*Hoh ho ho!*” There was a gleam of light in the Goddess’s eyes.

“My, my, Hijiri-san... You continue to surpass my expectations for you. I was not wrong about you. That said, you will at least help me, won’t you?”

“You’re asking me to control the heroes into doing what you want them to do?”

“Oh, wonderful!♪ You understood exactly what I meant right away!♪” said the Goddess, tilting her head to the side a little and

smiling broadly, her hands still clasped together. "What will it be, then? I do think you're capable of it, Hijiri-san."

"I don't think I will be able to accept your offer."

"Thank you for your answer—it was exactly the one I expected.♪"

"There is the matter of my sister to contend with, of course—and Sogou-san, as you are aware."

"You're already accounted for then, I see!♪ It seems you two have been like two peas in a pod of late! I happened to overhear that you have frequently been meeting in private together! No, no, it's quite all right—I! You are two young ladies, of course, but I have no intention of speaking a word to anyone of your...*association*. Go right ahead, please! I do hope you two girls have a long relationship together."

"That's a rather negative way of putting it."

"Do forgive me. But don't speak to me in that tone, if you please? It scares me. Please."



“In any case, I believe she will listen to what I have to say.”

“Wonderful news—!”

“The other *faint* heroes should obey Sogou-san’s orders as well.”

“But...what of Kirihara-san? Excuse the expression, but he seems to have more screws loose than I first thought. To be perfectly honest, he rather frightens me of late...”

“In my opinion, his thinking and desires have their own unique sort of laws that bind them. I don’t believe it will be impossible to control him, depending on how you go about it.”

“What are the chances of success?”

“Just under ninety percent.”

“Are you quite sure?”

“He is not paying the same keen attention to his surroundings as you are.”

“My, my, is that so?♪”

“I mean to say he isn’t overly cautious. Humans like him are surprisingly easy to manipulate.”

“That disturber of the peace Oyamada is done for as well, isn’t he?” said the Goddess.

“Was that part of the reason you secretly decided to distance Yasu Tomohiro from us as well? Because he disturbs the peace?”

“I’m sorry? What on earth are you speaking of? Are you quite well?”

The air in the atmosphere froze in place, and Hijiri slowly looked down at her lap.

“My apologies. There was no need for that. Please, forget I said anything.”

“*Oho ho ho ho!* That’s it!♪ That’s the ticket!♪ This respect and self-reflection of yours—it is precisely what all the other heroes are lacking. Especially that one... I feel no remorse or respect from Sogou at all. *Ahem.* Forgive me if that came across as my badmouthing your girlfriend, will you? I meant no offense.”

“Of course.”

“It appears that Sogou still feels that...that *pathetic* boy, the lowest in the class...I cannot remember his name. The pathetic boy who had such pathetic parting words... No matter. Why did she rebel against me when I disposed of him? She still does not appear to believe her actions to be rebellion. And I have yet to hear a word of remorse from her lips. Is it some fault of her parents, perhaps, that she was raised to be so? How unfortunate for her.”

“I will take my time broaching the matter with Sogou-san directly.”

“Can I leave it in your hands?”

“I will do my utmost.”

“Well, it’s most important that all of the S-class heroes are in step together now, isn’t it? But as for Asagi and her group...I will try to ensure we can regroup with them whenever I manage to get in contact. Or would you rather I eliminate them?”

“No... Ikusaba Asagi has the strength to lead. She will be useful in assembling the others when S-class heroes are unavailable.”

“Very well, I will not eliminate them, then.”

“By the way, there is another question I would like to ask you. My sister has been worrying about it and has entreated me to ask you directly when I had the chance—though I did assure her there was no need for any further confirmation.” Hijiri sighed. “And I believe several of the other heroes have much the same concerns. Sogou-san has in fact spoken of it to me. To be quite honest, it’s an indelicate question. I apologize if my asking it should cause you offense.”

“Now now, we are friends, aren’t we, Hijiri-san? ♪ I won’t get angry now, so go right ahead. What is it? Go on, ask it.”

“After we defeat the Demon King Empire, will you really be able to send us home—back to our world?”

“Of course... Of course I will. Why do you ask?”

“That is exactly the answer I expected, and so I did reassure my sister that it was a meaningless and insulting question, but she will be reassured to hear your response. I’m sure it will be a boon to her mental fortitude in the coming battle against the Demon King’s forces.”

“I see. To think you’re even considering the mental health of the other heroes—I should have expected nothing less from you.”

“With the three top Inner Circle Demons defeated, the final battle with the Demon King must be close at hand. That is one reason why the heroes have begun to worry now, as their journey home draws so near. In any case, I intend on doing my utmost to defeat the Demon King. Everything I am capable of, at the very least...”

The Goddess seemed to pick up on the meaning behind Hijiri’s words.

“*Oh ho ho*, have no fear. I will deal firmly with the Wildly Beautiful Emperor in the west—leave all that to me. I am a God, after all.”

“Thank you. We will focus our efforts on defeating the Demon King.”

The Goddess leaned forward and laid a collar on the table between them.

“This collar is to be used in your final battle against the Demon King. If you destroy his heart completely, a tremendous amount of Demon King Essence will be released into the air. Only the crystal in this collar can capture it. I did explain this to you before, did I not?”

Hijiri remembered back to their summoning—the words the Goddess had spoken when she explained how they could return home.

She remembered the way the Goddess had pulled the black crystal collar from her robes to show it to them.

“We know of only two ways to obtain it. The first is to get it directly from the source—the Demon King’s heart. The second is to defeat the Demon King and gather the essence in crystal form when he dies, using this collar.”

“The Demon King Essence that dwells within the heart of the root of all evil is both unique and abundant. If I were to approach him, I might not be able to bear it. The time has come for me to grant this collar to a hero. When the fighting heads north...I would like to entrust this device to you, Hijiri Takao.”

Hijiri looked down at the collar on the table.

“I suppose I should say this is an honor?”

“Hijiri Takao.” The Goddess closed in on her in an instant, leaning out over the table. Her hand encircled Hijiri’s, and she could see her own reflection in Vicius’s golden, emotionless eyes. “The upcoming battle with the Demon Empire will decide everything that is to come—

we cannot afford to lose. You heroes cannot. I cannot. Please...”

Her smile grew ever wider. “Don’t go betraying me now, will you?”

“Me? Betray you, Goddess? Whatever would be in it for me?”

“Mira too should have nothing to gain from betraying me. Yet their actions have hurt me deeply and left a bitter taste in my mouth.”

“What would be the consequences of betraying you?”

“I know not if it will be before or after the fall of the Demon King—but allow me to show you the fate of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor...”
The Goddess smiled.

Hijiri returned to her room.

It was much more spacious than the one she had lived in back in the old world—she had only recently learned that it was the most lavish given to any student of 2-C, even among her fellow S-class heroes. There were fine furnishings within, including a comfortable canopy bed. There was even a personal bath, which would be filled by an attendant at the mere ring of a bell.

She walked alone to the desk, drew out the chair, and sat, emptying her pockets as she did so and placing her smartphone on the desk beside her. She hadn’t touched a drop of the Goddess’s tonoa water, so she poured herself a glass from the pitcher in her room and drank it all in one gulp. The drink calmed her, and she relaxed like a still pond once all the ripples had settled. She untied her hair and shook her head to let it fall. After brushing it lightly aside, she unlocked her smartphone.

Her battery was waning—but it was extremely strange that she could use it at all. Every smartphone except Hijiri’s had already run out of power and was now completely useless. Hijiri’s phone was the exception—she’d been able to charge hers up.

My unique skill Wind—Thunder Wind. It’s kept me going.

She had yet to tell Itsuki of this new development. Hijiri didn’t have a clear idea of how exactly it worked, only that it did.

This unique skill is unusually broad and flexible.

Was it because she was an S-class? Did the “S” in her title have

some special meaning, different from the others? Hijiri herself did not know.

Perhaps the other S-class heroes' abilities are just as free and flexible.

She was also hit by a new and strange sensation—the ability to tell when someone was lying simply by hearing their voice. The delicate shifts in fluctuation and tone let her tell truth from falsehood. But it wasn't foolproof, and she needed to concentrate.

Perhaps this is some aspect of my unique skill too? Do S-class skills affect their users in some manner? I do not know—this requires further testing.

Hijiri suddenly remembered reading a text in the closed-stack library. It was something about a “stray spirit” or “outcast spirit”—a spirit with the ability to see through lies. Its name was Silfigzea.

The wind spirit, the ability to see through lies, my Wind unique skill... Could there be some connection?

Hijiri returned her thoughts to the task at hand, putting in her earbuds and clicking through her smartphone menu.

Play back recent audio file—click.

Choose a file to listen to—click.

Listen to this file—click.

“Of course... Of course I will.”

Repeat.

“Of course... Of course I will.”

Repeat.

“Of course... Of course I will.”

Repeat...

How many times have I played back this recording now?

She took out her earbuds, placed the smartphone back on the edge of the desk, and closed her eyes in silence. The time stretched on—she blocked out all the sounds of those in the rooms around her.

Finally, Hijiri opened her eyes. She had no idea how long had

passed.

The room was deafeningly silent.

Her doubts had solidified into certainties. At last, she spoke into the empty room.

“I see.”

The conversation I just had with the Goddess.

“After we defeat the Demon King Empire, will you really be able to send us home—back to our world?”

“Of course... Of course I will. Why do you ask?”

Hijiri turned her eyes to the window. There were rays of sunlight spilling in through a gap in the curtain, and she could see dust particles sparkling in the air within—the way they shone was almost unreal. Hijiri looked on with emotionless eyes, letting the single word slip from her lips.

“Liar.”

SOGOU AYAKA

SOGOU AYAKA SAT with her elbows on the writing desk in her room, her head in her hands.

“Don’t worry. We only have to pretend, and if you like, you can come up with a reason to refuse: “I’m too embarrassed to do that here” or similar, perhaps. We simply have to give the impression that we are in that sort of relationship.”

Those were Takao Hijiri’s words.

What’s a first kiss worth, anyway?

Ayaka thought back to the cafeteria, not long ago—

Ayaka ate breakfast in the dining hall that day, sitting at a table with Suou Kayako, Nihei Yukitaka, and Murota Erii.

For now, it seems Hijiri's proposal to split the heroes into groups has been going well.

Ayaka proposed that the leaders of each group should meet up regularly to eat together. Happily since then, her breakfasts had become much more pleasant than they used to be. Hijiri walked over with her tray in hand and spoke—just as Ayaka expected she would.

“Sogou-san, may I take this seat?”

She's here.

“Ah, sure. I'm sorry, Murota-san, would you mind making a little more space?”

“Eh...I don't mind. B-but...Takao's sitting next to you now, Class Rep. So, like, the rumors are true?”

Hijiri sat down and placed her tray on the table, elegantly combing a hand through her hair as she addressed Murota.

“By rumors, do you perchance mean those pertaining to Sogou-san and myself?”

“Um! Ah... Well, yeah, I suppose. *Ha hah*, but talk is just talk, right? So...what's really going on?”

Murota looked around after the question, clearly worried that Hijiri's younger sister Itsuki might jump at the suggestion. Itsuki, for her part, was sitting with her back turned to them, eating her own breakfast.

Hijiri must've asked her to pretend not to notice that. But I bet she's actually listening in... Ah, look.

Just as Ayaka expected, she saw Itsuki's eyes flash like a cat's as they glanced back in her direction.

The rest of Ayaka's meal passed quite uneventfully.

Not to say that nothing happened at breakfast though.

Hijiri was clearly stealing looks at Ayaka as she ate—it was obvious from how she positioned herself and the way her eyes were facing. It made Ayaka blush as she tried to finish her breakfast.

No. I know what's happening here. Everything is going according to plan... But this is Takao Hijiri we're speaking of. Needless to say, she's mesmerizing. I can barely eat with her looking at me like this.

Nihei and the others were captivated by Hijiri as well. Ayaka somehow managed to shake off the seductive advances and finish her rice, but just as she was wiping her mouth after the meal...

"Sogou-san." Hijiri leaned in closer, just a little. "You...missed a spot, just there."

"Eh?"

Hijiri placed her soft hand on Ayaka's cheek. It felt warm to the touch. Their prior planning discussion suddenly raced through Ayaka's mind.

"If we do everything according to a script, it's possible you might come off somewhat unnatural in your reactions. Let's try another way, shall we? You should ad lib as you please, but I'd like you to go along with my improvisation. Don't worry, I'll take the lead."

Hijiri leaned in even closer, her face very near Ayaka's now.

A-acting... Ad lib... We're just doing this to make everyone in class think that we're together...

Ayaka leaned toward Hijiri now too, barely conscious of what she was doing.

Warm, soft lips.

"Ah..."

Just now, it was faint... But did my lips and Hijiri's make contact? Did they touch? They—our—lips just touched!

Ayaka and Hijiri looked into each other's eyes.

B-but then... Was it just my imagination? Even Hijiri herself looks a little surprised...



Ayaka suddenly realized what had happened—she understood.

I see. Now I get it. She likely wanted to act out that cliché—eating the grain of rice right off my face. She was trying to get at it with her mouth—that’s why she bit my lip just now.

She was being considerate toward me—making it so we didn’t even need to kiss, but I—

I got lost in the moment.

“...S-seriously?” Murota Erii stared at the two of them, open-mouthed with a stupefied expression on her face. “So, like, those rumors *are* true...”

“Haah...”

Ayaka sighed.

Was that really my first kiss? Does it still count if you don’t like the person?

Ayaka could hardly claim she hated Hijiri, though.

We hadn’t spoken all that much until recently, but I clearly do like her now. Eh? But does that mean it really was my first kiss?

Ayaka was reeling as her head sank back into her hands. Then she heard a knock at the door.

“Sogou-san, might I come in?”

“H-Hijiri-san?!”

Flustered, she pushed back her chair and stood, unable to hide her panic at the unfortunate timing of Hijiri’s arrival. Ayaka tried her best to calm herself as she stood before the door, and for some reason took a moment to fix her hair and clothes before opening it.

“Ahem, is there something you need?”

Ah, what am I saying?

Ayaka put a hand to her forehead. “The fact that you’re visiting me obviously means there’s something you need. I’m sorry... I was just thinking about something and was a little lost in my own head.”

“If you’re unwell, I can come back another time.”

“No, I’m fine... Come in,” said Ayaka, allowing Hijiri into her room.

“Have you heard the recent news of the Empire of Mira?”

“Eh? Their attack on Ulza? Yes. But why would the Wildly Beautiful Emperor do such a thing?”

“It’s possible he may have some chance of winning this war. If not, I cannot imagine he would defy the Goddess so.”

“Yes, you’re right. But aside from the Demon King Empire, I can scarcely imagine who could be stronger than the Goddess.”

Hijiri smiled faintly at that.

“You, perhaps? One day.”

“M-me?”

“There’s a nonzero chance. Well...” Hijiri looked at the floor. “Depending on how we S-class heroes act, it’s possible we may be able to exceed even the Goddess’s strength.”

Does Hijiri already know what an S-class would need to do to achieve that?

Ayaka hadn’t the slightest clue what it could be.

“But with the Strongest Man in the World dead...are there any other candidates, I wonder?”

“Aside from the Wildly Beautiful Emperor...the Captain of the Sixth Order, maybe? And Belzegea-san of the Lord of the Flies Brigade is still an unknown quantity... He was the one who defeated the First of the Sworn Einglanz with his cursed magic.”

“Belzegea of the Lord of the Flies Brigade. But I wonder...”

“Hijiri-san?”

“If he—Belzegea... Against the Goddess, it’s possible he might...” She mumbled to herself quietly as if speaking a monologue, and Ayaka couldn’t hear everything that she said. Hijiri then trailed off and sat in silent thought for a few moments. “My apologies. It’s nothing to concern yourself with now. Sogou-san, I would like to get to the reason for my visit if I may. It’s quite important, you see.”

What's this about?

Ayaka nervously waited for Hijiri to speak.

"The trouble we had...that kiss. I wanted to ask if you were okay."

"Eh?"

"If that was your first kiss, then I imagine it might have been quite a shock to you... Itsuki told me as much. That is why I came to check on you. I'm sorry for what happened—I should have better explained my reasoning."

"N-no...I'm fine. Don't worry, i-it's my fault for misinterpreting your instructions in the first place. I-is that the only reason you came to see me?"

"Considering our future relationship, regardless of your thoughts on the matter, I believed that I should apologize."

"R-right, then... Thank you for being so considerate." Ayaka lowered her head in a bow, her knees neatly aligned in Hijiri's direction.

"Are you quite sure you're okay?"

"I was a little surprised, but...yes, I'm fine. Thank you for checking in on me."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Ayaka chuckled to herself, and Hikiri gave her a quizzical look.

"Ah, my apologies," said Ayaka. "I just... I see how much Itsuki-san loves you so and...I think I understand somewhat how she must feel."

"How Itsuki feels?"

"If I had a big sister like you, I just know I would end up relying on her for everything."

"Itsuki and I are counting on you too, you know?"

Ayaka smiled and laughed.

"Then I suppose we're in the same boat."

Hijiri flitted her eyelashes down to the floor, and for just a brief moment, she smiled.

"Perhaps we will be, yes."

Chapter 3:

The Four Shining Warriors, and the Sixth Order of Knights

THE IMMORTAL KING ZECT summoned the Seven Lights back to the meeting room. He sat at the head of the table, farthest from the door. I was positioned at the seat to his right, and Seras was standing behind me, summoned by a messenger the king had sent.

“Why not sit, Lady Seras? I prepared a chair over there for you,” said the king. King Zect had already asked Seras if she was feeling better when she entered the room, and now he offered her a seat once more.

She glanced at Gratrah, captain of the king’s personal guard, in her position just a little behind King Zect, then returned her eyes to Zect himself.

“Thank you for your consideration, but I will stand for this meeting.”

He truly cares for people, this king.

The first to arrive was Amia. “Oh, just when I was wondering what this was about, here’s Sir Belzegea again.”

“Thank you for speaking to King Zect, Amia-dono, and assisting in so quickly procuring an opportunity for me to speak with him.”

“Hm. I appreciate your thanks.” Amia slithered over and sat next to me. The chairs were all different sizes and shapes—it seemed the one next to me was for lamiae to use.

Right then—these are the members I’ve already met.

Soon after, a dragonkin woman arrived. She had the head and tail of a dragon and looked a little like a lizardman. Wearing white light armor over her reddish-brown scales, she wasn’t that tall in stature, and her eyes were a deep green color.

“My name is Belzegea. I am pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Four Shining Warriors, Cocoroniko Doran.” She stated her name in a low tone and said nothing more, then sat at the table with her arms

folded.

Maybe she's just the silent type.

Less than a minute passed before the next arrival—a centaur woman. Her eyes were blue, and her hair was wavy and cream in color. Her lower body was that of a chestnut brown horse. The most striking thing about her was the purplish-blue color of the skin on her human upper half. She had earrings in her ears, and a symbol on her forehead that looked like a tattoo. She wore light armor as well—a black chestplate and gauntlets, both with gold inlay. A longbow hung by her side on the left, and a sword on her right. I introduced myself in the same way I had to Cocoroniko.

“Ah, so you're that Lord of the Flies guy I've been hearing about? Nice to meet you. I'm Kil Mail of the Four Shining Warriors.” She gave me a wink and trotted over to stand by Cocoroniko.

I guess she isn't going to sit, huh.

Cocoroniko gave Kil a meaningful glance but otherwise didn't speak to her.

A few more minutes passed.

“Sorry for the wait.” A leopardman walked briskly into the room. His fur looked nothing like Eve's, though—he was a black panther with deep red eyes. He was also taller than everyone else in the room, so much so that he made the entrance to the meeting room look smaller just by passing through it. His limbs were long, and the reach of his arms especially caught my attention.

There were two scabbards tied to the back of his belt. They hung behind him, forming a cross behind his legs.

Are those swords in there? They're huge.

“I'm Geo Shadowblade,” said the stocky leopardman.

“Ehm... And I'm Yerma Shadowblade,” came a voice, and a female leopardman popped her head out from behind him. Her fur was as black as his, and she was a foot shorter than Geo.

That's just comparing the two though—she's still taller than any human I know.

The biggest difference between the two of them was their faces. While Geo looked fierce, Yerma's expression was almost peaceful. Geo

gestured behind him with his thumb.

“This one wanted to join us... Sorry, King Zect, but do you mind letting this stubborn wife of mine sit in on the meeting? I’m late ’cause I wasn’t able to convince her otherwise.”

King Zect turned to the others.

“Does anyone here have any objection to Yerma’s presence?”

Nobody spoke up.

“Your Majesty—everyone—I’m so sorry,” apologized Yerma. “As I’m sure you are all well aware, my husband is quite quick to anger. On the off chance that he loses his temper, I want to be here to stop him. I heard of my husband’s battle with the prime minister during your last meeting...”

So she’s here to stop him if he gets out of control, huh.

Geo clicked his tongue.

“I only went for her ’cause that spider woman was talking like they don’t even need us here. Them arachne might be smart, but I don’t like ’em.”

“Only Lise is yet to arrive,” said King Zect.

A short while passed in silence, then a harpy soldier arrived at the door.

“I-I’m so sorry, Your Majesty!”

“What is it?”

“Prime Minister Lise has told me to convey that she will not make an appearance here until she has finished her work...and that this is not an emergency meeting. If these summons are the wishes of an unknown mercenary band, she says she has even less reason to attend.”

She looked to the King for forgiveness, and he nodded back in understanding. After the harpy soldier left, King Zect apologized to everyone.

“The meeting will begin after Prime Minister Liselotte Onik has arrived. Please wait a little longer.”

“You’re a human from the outside, eh, Lord of the Flies?” asked Geo Shadowblade, breaking the silence with a sudden question. His arms were folded as he looked down on me, and I felt Seras tense up at

my back. “Got a question for you. You know anything about a group of leopardmen called the Speed Clan?”

“I do, yes,” I replied.

“Tell me what you know.”

“Very well.” I told him what I knew of the Speed Clan—that they had been destroyed by a group of conceited humans who hated demi-humans.

I’m not going into what the Sword of Courage did specifically though—no matter what kind of relationship Geo’s clan might have had with the Speed Clan, he doesn’t need to hear all that.

I went on to tell him the little I’d heard from Eve of the Speed Clan itself, of the time before their slaughter. After I’d finished, Geo looked down at the floor, a hand on his head. His shoulders were trembling.

“...*Mua hah, ha ha ha!*” The black leopardman began to laugh. “Idiots.”

“...”

“*Hah!* They ain’t changed a bit. That’s what they get for trusting humans, huh?!” Geo threw his head back and laughed even harder. “Serves ’em right! Can’t say nobody warned ’em, eh?! *Ha ha ha!* Those —”

I sat quietly, looking up at him.

“Blasted fools!” He kicked his chair backward, sending it flying to crash hard against the wall behind him. He walked over to the wall, his back toward us, and began to pound the stone hard with his fists.

“Idiots! Fools!” There was rage, sadness, and regret in his voice. “S-so stupid!”

Yerma walked over to him and gently placed a hand on his back.

“When our clan came to this country to hide, we invited the Speed Clan to join us,” she said. “We asked them to come along when the Shadowblade Clan abandoned the human world, but the Speed Clan refused. They wouldn’t give up on trusting the humans. They said there would come a day when we could all smile and live together. That they wished to work toward that, no matter how long it took.”

Yerma gave a bitter smile and looked over at Geo. “It has always

bothered him. He's long talked about going out there and bringing the Speed Clan back, by force if necessary. But the others in our clan have always stopped him. I stopped him as well. If he went out there, and word got out about our survival, it could lead to the discovery of this country's location. It would put all those who live here in danger. He, and all the Clan Leaders before him, have been trapped here."

I knew it. When he first started laughing, it seemed like he was mocking the Speed Clan. But I could sense it all—the anger he feels with himself, and that terrible sorrow.

"Are they still alive?" asked Geo, the hatred in his voice thick. "The ones who killed the Speed Clan?"

"I killed them," I answered. "I drove them to the very depths of despair, then I killed them—every last one."

As Geo turned back toward me, I held both my hands out to him. His eyes opened wide, and he shook his head as if shaking off the emotions that were seething inside him. He took a breath before speaking again.

"Why? Why go so far? Did the Speed Clan mean something to you?"

"I met a survivor of the Speed Clan on my journey."

Geo gasped in surprise.

"Her name is Eve Speed—she's an important partner of mine. A friend."

"She's not with you? What happened to her?"

"She's with Anael—living with Erika Anaorbael."

Now it wasn't just Geo—the other Four Shining Warriors appeared surprised as well.

"So there is a survivor..." growled Geo.

I spoke to them all a little of how Eve and I came to travel together.

"I see. So you saved one of the Speed Clan. Now she's with Mistress Anael... I s-see." Geo clenched his fists ever tighter and, turning back toward me, took my hands in his. "Thank you. Please, you must let me thank you, Lord of the Flies."

"I accept your thanks, but there really is no need. I had no

intention of letting the Sword of Courage live. Even if I'd never met Eve...I was always going to slaughter them."

Because of what they did to Nyaki.

Geo raised his head and stood staring at me for a few moments.

"Lord of the Flies." He came to stand by my side. "If you ever have need of my strength, just say the word. I'll help you, no questions asked. I'll bring the whole force of the Shadowblade Clan to your side if need be."

"Thank you."

"And someday I would like to meet this Eve."

"I'd like that too, if possible."

Yerma went to stand by her husband's side and placed a hand on his arm.

"Dear, the Speed Clan met such a sad end. But there is some light there."

"Yeah. I can't be happy about any of this, but...there might be more survivors of the Speed Clan out there somewhere."

Geo and his wife returned to their chairs. Amia nodded, Cocoroniko still sat with her arms tightly folded, and Gratrah kept her eyes trained on me, observing closely.

I heard the sound of hooves getting closer as Kil Mail the centaur trotted over to me.

"Hey there, Lord of the Flies."

"Hello."

"You're wearing that Lord of the Flies mask, but...you're a good person under there, aren't ya?"

"I wonder about that. If other people curse me, say I'm evil...I've no intention of denying that."

Kil laughed and raised her round shoulders a little. "You're really something, y'know? Geo's the strongest of us Four Shining Warriors, and you got him on your side in no time flat!"

"I suppose you're right... I'm reassured to have an ally like Geodono." I looked over toward the entrance—both the double-doors were still wide open. "If we are to go to battle against the Goddess's forces,

that is.”

“You want to fight, Lord of the Flies?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Hmm. I think I understand the way you feel, but...” She trailed off and looked toward the door as well. There was a presence growing closer. Then, in a hushed tone, she continued, “She’s a fierce once, y’know? The way she talks, way she looks—don’t be fooled by that stuff, okay?”

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

A little girl appeared in the doorway...or at least, she *looked* like a little girl. Her stature was on the small side. She had blue hair tied up with a ribbon in thin twintails that looked like a spider’s legs. Her eyes were emerald. Her lower body was that of a spider with a humped abdomen, and her upper body was human.

“I am Liselotte Onik,” she said in a domineering tone as she fixed her forceful gaze on me. “Head of the Onik Clan, I’ll have you know. But I’ll allow you to address me as Lise. Well...? You’re that Lord of the Flies I’ve been hearing about, then.”

The last one we’ve been waiting for. Finally, the arachne prime minister’s here.

Lise came toward me, her eight legs chittering across the floor. She pointed a finger up at me, but her glare was clearly intended to be *looking down*.

“I’ve been informed you’re the one who requested this meeting. You have something to say that warrants summoning all the Seven Lights here? Something worthy of stealing *my* precious time?”

“Hey spider-brat.” A low voice cut in, and Lise turned from me to give Geo a displeased look.

“What now, Geo? Something to say? And I’m *always* telling you to stop treating me like a child. I’ve been in this world for over twenty years now, and there’s not much childish about me at all.”

Based on physical appearance—well, maybe “little girl” is going a bit far.

“My chest is hardly child-sized now, is it? Mine’s bigger than Amia’s, Kil’s, *and* Cocoroniko’s! You’re always so irritating, Geo!”

Lise gestured as if she was trying to shoo him away—she appeared genuinely annoyed. Geo clicked his tongue.

“This ain’t the first time you’ve shown this kinda cheek, prime minister... I’m not going to sit quiet if you keep up this rudeness toward Belzegea, y’know?”

“When have you ever been quiet? I hear your pointless howling even now.”

“Y-you brat—!”

“Would you mind taking a seat, Lise?” asked King Zect, breaking them up. “I understand if there’s something you’d like to say, but let’s sit first at least, shall we?”

Yerma had her arms wrapped around her husband’s waist as if to stop him before he had the chance to pounce.

“...Hmph. Very well.” Lise snorted at the rebuke and sat down.

The others took their seats as well. Seras had been wavering for some time, hesitating over whether to speak up or remain silent. I had casually motioned to stop her whenever I sensed her getting close, and she had followed my orders.

“Hup,” said Lise, hopping up onto a chair. Hers was wider than the others, made for arachne to sit on, and was set on the opposite side of the table from mine. She swayed a bit and smiled at me provocatively.

She looks like a cunning and mischievous girl, almost. Kil’s warning makes sense now too—she’s really watching me closely.

There was an everyday kind of sly wisdom in her eyes.

I get it. Don’t be deceived by her looks, eh?

King Zect looked out over the table once everyone was seated.

“We’ve all gathered here again today to discuss our plans—what we are to do in response to the Goddess’s invasion.”

Lise folded her arms behind her head and glared at the king.

“I think this has been the subject of quite enough discussion already, don’t you? In the last meeting, we did decide to put it to a vote tomorrow. We seem to have two new attendees now, but...” Lise’s eyes went to Seras, then me. “You aren’t going to tell me they’re going to get a vote, are you? Are these two going to be living here?”

“No,” the king answered.

“So they’re outsiders, then. They shouldn’t be allowed a vote under any circumstances. I won’t allow it. What exactly is the purpose of this new discussion, now that those two are in the room?”

I just wanted to meet with the Seven Lights—and especially to see this arachne prime minister in person. But, well, I suppose I do need to give a reason.

I looked over at the king, who seemed to be struggling for an answer, and lightly raised my hand.

“May I speak?”

“Go ahead.”

“Then allow me to simply introduce myself once more. I am the leader of the Lord of the Flies Brigade, a mercenary group. My name is Belzegea.” All eyes were now on me. “First, let me thank you all for taking the time to meet with me. We have expressed our will to help you in your fight against the Goddess’s forces, and I wish to take this opportunity to discuss strategy together.”

Lise wrinkled her brow into a frown—she was visibly displeased. “What in the world are you proposing?”

I gave the king some information about the Goddess’s forces before the first meeting, so it’s safe to assume that’s all been passed on to Lise.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, there’s a very high probability that the Goddess’s forces which are presently closing in on this country are hostile in nature—to say nothing of their strength, and the real danger they pose. I believe we should take this opportunity to exchange information and decide whether to go out and meet them on the battlefield.”

I placed a hand on my chest and continued. “I came here from the outside world. I’ve heard it said that your people have been locked in this country for many years, and I wish to be of assistance in bridging the information gap that has developed between the world in here and the one outside.”

Actually, Seras knows more about the outside world than I do—that’s why I asked for her to help before we even started this meeting. She should be ready to back up my answers and explanations with details as necessary.

“The situation is deadly serious—”

“What in the *world* are you saying?” Lise interrupted. She placed both of her hands on the table and rose.

“Did I offend you in some way?”

“Of course you did! Your premise is all wrong. You... You assume we’re going to fight, don’t you? Are you an idiot?” Lise was glaring daggers at me, her expression bordering on loathing. “We cannot fight. It’s simply unthinkable.”

“What do you plan on doing, then?” I asked.

“We should talk to them—resolve this by negotiating.”

“To be frank, I do not think they can be negotiated with.”

“You savage,” spat Lise, leaning forward even further. “What makes you so sure they can’t be reasoned with, anyway?”

I was almost in awe of the intensity of Lise’s gaze.

“It’s just a personal feeling of yours, isn’t it? An *impression*. You think there’s no negotiating with them, but we won’t know that unless we try, will we? Perhaps a savage such as yourself is incapable of comprehending that fighting and shedding blood isn’t the only way to solve one’s problems. Simply barbaric.”

“We won’t know unless we try.”

Well said—I can agree to that. You shouldn’t give up before you’ve even tried. Better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all.

But is that always the right path to take? Trying this and failing could well mean trapping ourselves in a hopeless situation or delaying our preparations so long that we’re unable to change course.

“We won’t know unless we try,” eh?

Yes—but those are also dangerous words.

“The Thirteen Orders of Alion...have you ever encountered them personally? Do you have some deep knowledge of their activities? I have heard rumors that the bulk of their number are ruffians and criminals—but is that information to be trusted? And don’t bother lying to me, mind you. If I find out after the fact that you’ve been lying to me, I’ll have Kurosaga bear the responsibility for every lie I’m told.”

...Now she’s bringing up Kurosaga—she knows that they’re the reason I’m here.

“Let me ask you again: do you have any information about these Thirteen Orders of Alion that is not mere rumor or hearsay?”

“I do not. All I know of them is what others have told me.”

“What about you?” Lise turned on Seras without missing a beat and fixed her with a piercing stare.

“I too...have never met or seen them in person. All the information I have regarding them is anecdotal. Yet I do not believe for a moment that they can be peacefully negotiated with,” Seras protested, desperately pleading her case.

“I don’t at all care for *opinions* on the matter,” said Lise, quickly shutting down Seras’s appeal. “Say whatever you like, with as much passion as you can muster—but those are just your opinions. Your personal circumstances have nothing to do with this. There exists no relationship of trust between us, and evidence is everything. If you wish to convince us, I suggest you produce some.”

Her logic isn’t flawed. All the things she’s said so far make sense.

“None of our personal experiences will do anything to sway you?” I asked.

They won’t, of course...especially not this prime minister.

“They will not. Not one iota.”

Just as I thought.

“You are aware of the Goddess’s obsession with this country, of course?”

“Her focus is on the Kurosaga, is it not?”

So this arachne knows that too. The true reason Vicius is so obsessed with the Country at the End of the World.

Lise sighed. “I would have preferred to avoid playing that card if possible... But, well, it was unavoidable. *You* forced my hand, Belzegea.”

Looking at the other Seven Lights’ reactions... The only other one who already knew for sure that Vicius is coming after the Kurosaga Clan was King Zect. Geo and Kil both look like they had their suspicions—and Amia, Cocoroniko, and Gratrah didn’t seem to know at all.

“But don’t worry. Even if the Goddess does happen to be after Kurosaga, I won’t ever give them up to her—no matter what.”

I stared blankly at her.

“I’ll go out there and negotiate with the Goddess, and she’ll forgive Kurosaga. I’ll convince her. I’ll change even that Goddess’s mind—*me*. I am Liselotte Onik—the Onik blood flows through my veins—I can do it. I will show you that, Belzegea.”

I agreed to help on Munin’s request, but I shouldn’t tell Lise that. It’d only communicate to her that Munin thinks we should fight, and could make Lise think less not only of her but maybe even of Kurosaga as a whole.

“But hey, Lise?” Kil interrupted. “We escaped here in the first place to get away from the humans, right? I thought we made this whole country for demi-humans and monsters ’cause we knew peacefully negotiating with the guys out there wouldn’t work?”

“Feelings and thoughts do change with time, you know? Maybe the humans today are different from the ones back then. It seems to me you have a very narrow outlook on the future if you assume the Goddess and the people out there haven’t changed at all. We think far too much about the past. All of us do.”

We shouldn’t give up on dialogue, shouldn’t resort to violence. It’s important to sincerely try to engage with these people. She’s right. She’s too right.

Hopelessly right.

Suddenly, there was the sound of a fist hitting the table. Amia was the only one who flinched, leaning back in her chair with a quiet “Whoaa...” to herself.

...She’s jumpier than I would have guessed.

Geo Shadowblade stood, lifting his fist from the table.

“Those humans killed leopardman clans—my own flesh and blood. Not just that—these are humans under the direction of that Goddess, he says.” He placed both hands on the table, leaning forward a little due to his height. “The Lord of the Flies over there met the ones who slaughtered the Speed Clan and killed them. Sounds like he even met a Speed Clan survivor on his way here—took revenge for ’em. What I’m tryna say is... Look, it’s the ones that follow the Goddess that’re the evil ones, no matter how you look at it.”

Lise’s eyes were gleaming.

I was going to tell her about the Sword of Courage later... Another

card I just lost the ability to play.

“The Sword of Courage...perchance? I heard from King Zect that the fly over there has defeated them. Listen, you,” Lise looked directly at me, as if unwilling to let a single lie escape her gaze. “Did you try to make peace with them? Did they not show a shred of intent to compromise with you?”

“They were already morally broken people when I met them. There was no room to negotiate,” I replied.

Not that I had any intention of doing so anyway.

Lise glanced at Geo. “Geo, you... Just now you mentioned revenge, no?”

“I did. What of it?”

“Pure revenge, wasn’t it? You never had any intention of compromising with these people, did you?!” Lise pounded the table fiercely.

She’s right.

“Perhaps they did try to negotiate with you, and you’re simply hiding it because it doesn’t suit your narrative of the situation! No, I understand now.” Lise’s eyes were blazing with righteous indignation. “You have some other reason for hating the Goddess...isn’t that right?!”

“...”

“Those are the Goddess’s men coming for us, after all. And you detest the Goddess. You want to use this country’s military strength to beat her forces in battle. Am I incorrect? You lie repeatedly to us, urging us to hate the Goddess’s forces too—you’re using sweet talk to try and manipulate us, aren’t you?!” She pounded the table again as she questioned me. “Isn’t that right?!”

She’s smart, that’s for sure. Quick thinking and a good speaker—it also helps that half the things she just pointed out are actually true. I’m trying to use this country’s strength to defeat the Thirteen Orders of Alion—there’s no question about that.

“But nobody wants to get wounded in battle!” Lise continued, her voice growing ever stronger. “They don’t want to die! Are you listening?! We don’t resolve our issues with bloodshed any longer! Look at what we’ve done in this country of ours! We’ve survived by *avoiding* war, not waging it! We’ve never tolerated solving our problems with

violence, *especially* not since I became prime minister! We discuss our issues! We work them out together!”

This could be a bit tricky. It's likely Lise has only ever experienced success with this kind of negotiating—ever since she took her position as prime minister. She's always resolved the quarrels that come before her with nonviolent means. And it's always worked...with the people of this country.

She can't help but think this situation will be the same.

Lise stared over at Geo with half-opened eyes. “This is exactly why I’ve been proposing we do away with the Four Shining Warriors and their band of soldiers entirely. Having too much military strength will only make them overly cautious of us. Gratrah’s guards are quite sufficient for our defense. There’s no need to put ourselves in danger in some battle. I cannot be the only one here who doesn’t want to see their friends die...can I?”

“We have different priorities,” said Geo provocatively. “And you’re an easy mark.”

“By fighting and needlessly shedding blood over this, we forever lose the ability to negotiate peacefully with these people... Have you not even considered that? Why do you lack such imagination when it comes to these matters?”

“I can’t help but think tryn’ta negotiate peacefully with these guys...it just ain’t realistic,” said Geo.

“As I said earlier, all quarrels in this country are resolved through peaceful means. Especially since I took up the post of prime minister. That is *reality*.”

“Not all of them.”

“I told you earlier, didn’t I? For exceptions we’ll have a small number of soldiers—Gratrah’s personal guards are more than enough!”

I see. When Geo said Lise acted like they were unnecessary, his anger showed. He disagrees with her about the future of their military.

“That’s not—”

“In any case!” Lise cut him off, pounding the table once more. “Isn’t this all happening because of our soldiers to begin with?!”

Geo glared back at her, but there was an unsteady look on his face. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“In the past, we demi-humans and monsters sought to have military strength that could rival the humans. That’s precisely the reason the Goddess and all those following her view us as a threat today, isn’t it?”

Geo looked like he couldn’t find the words to reply.

“If we show them we don’t have any soldiers, the humans won’t see us as dangerous, will they? Try to think about it from their perspective! Would we be able to trust a group of people who were clearly arming themselves for battle? Am I wrong?!”

“Th... W...” Geo was at a loss for words.

“And the rest of you. Do you really believe humans are such bundles of bad intentions?! Can’t you try and see the good in them?!” She turned slowly around the room to look over the faces of the other Seven Lights. “I can. On the honor of the Onik Clan, I *will* resolve this matter peacefully. Without a single casualty, without any violence! Please, everyone...trust me!”

“...”

She’s an idealist. That’s what she sounds like to me—no other word for it. That idealism of hers has worked for her here. That’s why everyone puts their trust in Liselotte Onik and the goodness of others.

Well, good people do exist, she isn’t wrong about that. And Lise believes that there is good in all people.

I was right...this is going to be tricky. Her belief in good is going to get them swallowed up by evil—her trust in their ideals will lead them to be consumed by the reality of the situation. Unless I can prove to Lise just how dangerous the Goddess is, I won’t be able to convince her to abandon her dangerous strategy of negotiation.

Even if I reveal to her that I’m a Hero from Another World and explain how I came to be sent down into the Ruins of Disposal, I doubt any of that will matter to her. She would likely just see it as a matter for the Goddess and humans to settle among themselves. She would only think I hadn’t negotiated with the Goddess properly. Talking about the Sword of Courage and Nyaki would probably end the same way—Lise will think she would’ve been able to reason with them, even people with logic as twisted as that group’s. She believes in her own abilities, no matter what.

My mind was racing.

So...where do I go from here? Can I do this? No...I have no other choice.

"Understood," I said, drawing the attention of everybody in the room.

I won't know unless I try. She's right about that at least.

"I would like to thank you all for spending your precious time discussing this issue and giving me the opportunity to express my opinion to you here today. I understand the prime minister's view in regard to this matter and see that we have a difference of opinion. There is also the vote tomorrow, I believe... I am aware that the Seven Lights will make your decision then."

"I wouldn't mind deciding it right here and now, personally," said Lise, but King Zect raised a hand to stop her.

"The discussion has become rather heated...I believe we all need time to cool our heads and think. We will take the vote tomorrow, as scheduled."

"Fine," Lise assented reluctantly.

King Zect stood from his chair.

"Then we will meet back here tomorrow before noon. Thank you all for your attendance."

Lise rose to leave as soon as the meeting was done, but I exchanged a few words with her before she left.

"Looks like you're a human to me... Is that mask to hide some injury or burn underneath?" she asked.

"Oh, the mask? Well, it is because I believe that walking around this country as a human would draw the wrong kind of attention."

"I thought as much," she said provocatively. "You don't trust the people who live here, do you? You're hiding the fact that you're human."

"..."

"I accept that Anael achieved great things in the past, but to send someone like you to our country—frankly, I'm disappointed in her. She's caught in the old way of thinking, just like you are."

Lise left those words hanging in the air as she scuttled from the room.

King Zect gave thanks once more to those assembled and left too, with Gratrah following. Seras turned to me and apologized as soon as they were gone.

“I’m so sorry, Sir Belzegea. What happened earlier, I...”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it.”

When Lise had been talking about Erika, Seras had clearly wanted to interrupt and disagree—but I stopped her from doing so.

“And anyway, we can’t convince people who haven’t met Erika in person recently. We know how amazing she is. That has to be enough for now.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I feel ashamed of the way I acted.” She shrank, filled with embarrassment and self-reproach for almost getting ahead of herself.

“I know how you feel. In any case, I’ve got a lot of work for you coming up.”

“Understood. I will do whatever work my master requires of me.”

“Might tire you out a bit, you know?”

“I’m the former Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah—I believe I have the stamina to keep up.”

“That’s reassuring to hear.”

The rest of those in the meeting room were making for the door.

“Four Shining Warriors, I have a request, if I may,” I called out to them.

They stopped to look at me. Kil placed her index finger on her lower lip and smiled at me suggestively. “Don’t tell me, you want us to vote in favor of fighting, perhaps? Feel free to ask, I suppose... We’re all going to make our own decisions in the vote tomorrow, you know?”

“Hmh... She’s right,” said Geo in a low growl. “I’ve already made up my mind, but tomorrow’s the time for that. Ain’t no need for us to talk about it any longer now.”

“Just as Geo said, nobody here is going to make you any promises, Fly Guy.”

“No, you misunderstand. I have just a simple request, nothing I will insist upon...”

“What is it?” Geo folded his arms.

“I wish for a sparring partner for the pride of our mercenary group, Vice-Captain Seras Ashrain. In particular... I’d like to request this of you, Geo-dono.”

“Sparring? What’s your angle?”

“I’m simply interested, nothing more.”

On the surface, at least.

“In terms of combat ability and leadership instincts, she is the finest knight the Lord of the Flies Brigade has to offer. I also hear it said that Geo-dono is the strongest of your group, the Four Shining Warriors. I believe facing a strong warrior such as Geo-dono will prove an invaluable chance for Seras herself to grow and develop. That is, if he is willing to oblige the request...”

“Hmm... Finest knight, eh?” Geo stood before Seras and looked down at her, sizing her up. “Hmph, interesting. I accept.”

We walked with Geo outside to the training grounds within the castle. The grounds were outdoors, surrounded by stone walls on all sides. I could see areas where they had been repaired multiple times, and the fine grit of the ground below our feet was showing its age.

You could probably train about a hundred soldiers here at once. It’s pretty spacious.

Geo walked over to us with a box crammed full of weapons. He dropped it roughly to the ground, and I heard the clanging sounds of metal on metal from inside.

“We’ve got a few different weapons here—all of ’em blunted so nobody gets hurt. You’re fine with that, yeah?”

The other Four Shining Warriors had gathered to watch—all of them looked interested to see the two spar.

“Hmm hmm, what’s this? Almost looks like we’re all ready to head off into battle against the Goddess’s forces, don’t it?” said Amia.

“Nobody’s said that, have they, Amia?” The quiet Cocoroniko glared at Amia with displeasure. “I have no intention of sparring with her myself, but I cannot imagine that slim elf will have any chance of facing down Geo. But I am *curious*...” she said.

“Man, can’t you just admit it, Niko?”

“Silence, lamia. As I have said multiple times, I have no love for your inanity.”

“Not that I’m *trying* to sound inane...” Amia squinted back at her.

“You’re the squarest of all the Four Shining Warriors, Niko. *Of course* Amia is gonna rub you the wrong way,” said Kil, playing with her spear.

“Quiet. You are the worst offender of all, Kil.”

“No!” Kil wore an amused look of shock on her face and dropped her spear.

Seems like the Four Shining Warriors do get along with each other but aren’t overly friendly. It looks like they’re keeping their distance. I’m just lucky we managed to get all of them interested in this sparring match—I really want to use this opportunity to understand the relationship between them all.

“They might not act it, but they’re strong, y’know?” said Geo, who already had a curved katana in each hand. He tapped the backs of the blades against his shoulders twice.

“So, you ready?”

“I am,” Seras replied. She was holding a single longsword and was already in her battle stance. Geo’s eyes opened wide.

“Hmm... Now that’s a surprise. Stronger ’n you look, eh?”

I guess he knows a good stance when he sees it.

Geo took up a suitable stance of his own.

“How should we begin? What’s the signal?”

“I suppose the most reliable of us should do it!” Amia folded her arms and puffed out her chest.

“All right then, Niko,” said Geo.

“Very well,” Cocoroniko responded.

Amia was taken completely by surprise. “Hey?! What the heck was that?! You’re all so mean!”

A few moments later: “Begin.”

At Cocoroniko’s word, the sparring match commenced.

Seras and Geo's match ended.

It seemed their performance had left a strong impression on everyone in attendance. The other three had immediately asked for sparring matches of their own, and Seras was currently facing off against Amia. Geo walked over to stand next to me, still panting from his fight.

"What the heck *was* that?" he managed to sputter. "I knew she was something else when I saw her stance, but...she was out of this world! Seras Ashrain, wasn't it? She must be a real famous swordswoman in the outside world, yeah? To be honest, if the world out there is full o' knights like her, then..."

"There are few on her level out there. Eve Speed, the strongest bloodsport warrior in the world who I told you about—she says Seras has more talent for fighting than even she does."

Geo let out a long sigh of relief. "Otherwise we'd be done for... So that elf is especially strong even on the outside, yeah?"

"Yes, that's right."

Well, there also used to be guys like Civit out there... Then there's Sogou and the others like her.

I suddenly realized that Geo was still staring at me.

"Don't tell me... You ain't stronger than that elf when you've got a sword in your hand, are you?"

"No, I cannot hold a candle to her in close combat ability. She's currently training me in the ways of swordplay."

"So...you've got some other talents, then. Well, can't run a country with just brute strength, I s'pose." Geo clicked his tongue and scratched the back of his head, as if angry at the strange emotions he was feeling. "The arachne are the ones who run this place... Built it, made it what it is. We'd have never made it this far without them. I get that—I do."

"But it seems you still disagree with Lise-dono's way of thinking?"

"Everything she says, it's like she's got her head in the clouds, y'know?" Geo stopped scratching. "Hey, Lord of the Flies."

"Yes?"

"The word *ideal*... D'ya think we invented that word in the first place 'cause reality itself was too hard to bear?"

I thought about it for a moment. It was an interesting idea. Then I said, "I don't think having ideals is a bad thing. But it's only when ideals come into contact with reality that they have any meaning at all, I think. Unrealistic idealism is worthless. And, well, the ideals that Lise-dono is clinging to... I have to admit that they are a little too unrealistic to make it in the outside world. Unless we can provide her with the proof she wishes for, anything I say can be easily dismissed as just my personal opinion. That's where the discussion is bound to end."

Sometimes we've got to throw our ideals away to look at the world as it actually is—to deal with it as realists.

Well, enough with the convoluted reasoning, let's put it simply. The foul Goddess and the Thirteen Orders of Alion that follow her are bad news. There's not a doubt in my mind about that. Talking things out with them isn't realistic, and...I want to crush them.

But at the end of the day, that really is based on my personal opinion.

Geo scanned his eyes back over the other Four Shining Warriors, then turned back to me.

"Lord of the Flies, I've got something to ask you," he said, lowering his voice. "Everything depends on how the vote turns out tomorrow, but I've got an idea. Tonight... You think we can speak alone?"

Hmm... A secret meeting?

The sparring matches ended, and after exchanging a few more brief words, the Four Shining Warriors left the training grounds.

Seras walked over to me, wiping the sweat from her brow.

"So, how were they?" I asked.

I ended up focusing on my talk with Geo and didn't really pay attention to the other matches. Not a problem, though—I can just ask the one who was actually sparring with them.

"For warriors who have been long at peace, they are quite capable fighters."

Munin was the same, refusing to fall into peaceful habits—I guess that

goes for the other races too.

“What did you think of them as individual warriors?”

“Lady Cocoroniko may look slim, but I was very impressed by her ability to handle that greatsword. Her strength is far above average, I believe. She has stamina too... She moved so much during our match, but I saw no signs of her tiring whatsoever. On the other hand, her technique lags behind the other three.”

So she's a strength character, huh.

“Lady Amia is more adept at defending than attacking—her use of the shield was particularly skilled. She was also quick to make decisions, understanding exactly when to defend and when to push her advantage and attack. Her snake-like lower body also made it quite difficult to read her movements. I believe those unique movements of hers will be advantageous when it comes to offensive action.”

“What about Geo Shadowblade?”

Seras looked to be in awe. “He is *strong*. His build is impressive, and those muscles are even more powerful than they first appear. With the speed at which he can move, I am most impressed by the flexibility of his form. I believe it is that flexibility and the long reach of his arms that allow him to draw the long blades that hang behind him. I was surprised to see the way he manipulated them with one in each hand. His technique is also rather well refined. Not just that, but he has a quick mind for combat and impressive powers of observation. He was very good at adapting to changes in the flow of combat.”

She's really complimenting these guys—I suppose that Four Shining Warriors name isn't just for show.

“And Kil Mail?”

“She's strong too. Her footwork with those four legs was superb. We talked a little after we sparred, and she told me she is adept in the use of a wide array of weaponry. I also hear that she is one of the few centaurs of the Mail Clan that can manipulate mana—she is capable of using offensive magical items as well, I believe. Although...”

“Although...?”

“I think she was holding back when she sparred with me.”

“So it's possible she's actually the strongest of all the Four Shining Warriors?”

“No...I do believe that Sir Geo is a head above the others. Perhaps even two or three heads above. To be frank...I was somewhat surprised to find such a talented warrior in a country such as this one.”

Geo, for his part, spoke highly of Seras after their match as well.

“How was he compared to Eve?”

“He is stronger, I believe.”

She said that with no hesitation, huh.

“Perhaps they’re on the same level in terms of fighting technique. But I think when it comes down to it...”

“Their bodies are just made differently?”

“Yes.”

You often hear about it in sports—that the difference in height and build between athletes is the biggest factor. Physical differences can have a mercilessly large impact on the results of a match. I guess that’s why weight classes exist in boxing.

“But in that case, Seras, you...”

I stopped short of saying anything more, just gave Seras a long, examining look instead.

“Is something wrong...?” she asked, turning her head to the side in confusion.

Seras Ashrain and Geo Shadowblade... She made up for their physical differences with her technique? I guess it’s no wonder Geo was so surprised.

I pictured the two of them side by side in my head, the size of their bodies, and remembered what Geo had said about her. I remembered the way Eve had talked about Seras’s strength and the incredible potential she saw in her.

Come to think of it...she just sparred with all of the Four Shining Warriors and she doesn’t even look that tired.

“Hmph.” I smiled and puffed a sigh.

Jeez, what a talent.

“What is it? Master?”

Eve... It seems like your judgment really was accurate, wasn’t it?

After I finished eating in the castle, I went to visit Geo at his home in a corner of the eastern district. I saw a number of other black-furred leopardmen as I walked the streets—the area seemed to be home to the rest of the Shadowblade Clan.

Seras didn't accompany me—Geo did ask if we could speak *alone*, after all.

As chief of his clan and a member of the Four Shining Warriors, Geo's home was a large house that stood out from the rest. Yerma came to greet me at the door and let me inside. I entered one of the inner rooms to find Geo sitting deep in a large chair, the space dimly lit by candles set on the walls. I sat in the chair opposite him, and, after politely refusing his offer of drink, we got right down to the business at hand.

"Or at least, that's what I think," said Geo, after he had finished with what he'd wanted to say.

"Then you wish for me to cooperate with your plan?" I asked.

"If this goes well, the vote tomorrow won't be an issue no matter what the result turns out to be."

"Who else do you think might help?"

"Depends on what happens, but I think I'm going to approach Kil and Amia about this."

So he's going to propose it to them after seeing which way they vote, huh?

"What of Cocoroniko-dono?"

"She'll side with Lise. The Doran Clan owe a debt to the arachne, that much is plain to see."

"I understand."

I got that feeling too from the way she spoke at the training grounds—she did also say she had no enthusiasm for fighting.

"What do you think will happen with the vote tomorrow, Geo-dono? Kil-dono, for example."

"I want to think she'll side with the fighters, y'know? Back when that clan o' theirs was out in the world, they were hunted by the humans. Some kind of sudden change came over 'em—that blue skin and the marks on their foreheads're rare, defining marks that only the

Mail Clan bear.”

“So she views humans as dangerous?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“What of Amia-dono?”

“I just can’t read her. But...I heard the Lynx Clan have been laying eggs one after the other of late, see?”

I don’t know anything about lamiae biology, but that sounds like how they reproduce.

Geo gulped down a drink from the great wooden pitcher in his hand—the smell of alcohol was on his breath as he spoke.

“Depends on what Amia herself thinks. At a glance, y’might assume she don’t think at all, but she’s got deep-rooted beliefs and ideas of her own. She just hates details...it ain’t that she doesn’t understand them. She’s smart—and good at hidin’ it too.” Geo took another gulp.

Figures. She’s one of the Four Shining Warriors, after all.

“She seems very reasonable to me. Then King Zect and Gratrah-dono... How do you think they will cast their votes?”

“Gratrah and His Majesty aren’t getting a vote, ’parently.”

First I’ve heard of that.

“I only found out a bit before you came to visit. King Zect says he’ll respect the results, and Gratrah says she’ll respect the wishes of the king. So that leaves the five of us to decide, eh?”

So...Geo’s in favor of fighting, and there’s a good possibility Kil is leaning on that side as well... Lise’s firmly for peaceful negotiation, and from what I’ve heard Cocoroniko is with Lise.

“That leaves Amia-dono as the one who is the key to all this?”

“Knowin’ that Lise, she’s probably already snuck over to Amia’s place to try and convince her to come on board.”

“Do you think she’ll be convinced?”

“Can’t say. Figure not even Lise knows what Amia’s really thinkin’... Makes me worried. Amia’s stubborn, y’know? Doesn’t wear her thoughts on her sleeve. It’s why Lise has always had trouble with her.” Geo sighed. “So, to be honest, I really don’t know how the vote’s gonna turn out tomorrow. Ah, that’s right... There’s somethin’ else I

wanted to talk to you about. If it does come to battle, the arachne are thinking 'bout leaving this country.”

“They are the only ones capable of maintaining the ancient magical devices that sustain life here, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a threat.” Geo’s intelligent red eyes met mine. “After she heard your opinions in our second meeting today, Lise’s been getting scared about the vote tomorrow. I ’specially think Kil mighta changed her mind after hearing you speak. His Majesty too—I think his emotions were with Lise, but what you said really shook him. That’s why he decided to sit this one out—leave it up to the rest of us... After our first meeting, it was pretty clear I was the only one up for a fight.”

So my opinion really was that influential, huh? Still, Geo really must’ve been watching them all closely. He isn’t just a fighter.

“Lise-dono’s noticed the wind turning against her?” I said.

“Guess so, yeah. Figure Lise has a good feeling for how the others are gonna vote. She knows Amia’s the key to this.” Geo let out a low, beastly growl from the back of his throat. It was an amused—or perhaps ironic—laugh. “Never figured *Amia*’d be the one with the power in her hands.”

“If the arachne were to leave this country...”

“It’d be a disaster. It ain’t just about knowledge of the ancient magical devices and the politics. If we’re going to be negotiating with the humans on the outside someday, we’re going to need the Onik Clan for that.”

I suppose Lise knows about the food shortage crisis as well.

“You seem to have quite the faith in her abilities, Geo-dono.”

“I do—she’s real talented.”

“But...wouldn’t you yourself serve as a capable negotiator?”

“You know I’m a hothead, right? I just snap sometimes, can’t properly see what’s around me... Lise’s got a sharp tongue, but she’s better at keepin’ it in check. I can’t beat her when it comes to talkin’.”

Geo picked up his pitcher with both hands and got a faraway look in his eyes for a moment, then looked down to the floor.

“But hey... Now’s the one time that we’ve gotta band together and fight, and we’re here arguin’ among ourselves. We might not always get

along, but the Seven Lights have gotta pull together at times like these. I don't know...I feel terrible for the guys in the other clans, and all the people in this country who rely on us."

Geo Shadowblade really is thinking seriously about the people of his country... He's really blunt and unrefined, but he clearly cares for them.

"In any case, I understand the situation now," I said. "Amia-dono is the key to tomorrow's vote."

"If we can just get her on board, we'll be fine. But Amia—I've got no idea which way she'll go."

I had my suspicions, but it seems there's a special kind of distance between the members of the Four Shining Warriors. They aren't unfriendly with each other, but none of them are close either. Makes sense that they can't function as a group at times like these. They all live here in the same place, but they've got their own independence and individuality. This might just be a characteristic of countries that are a union of different races living together.

"Then if Lise-dono's strategy of peaceful negotiation gets voted on..."

"In that case, we go with the plan I told you 'bout, okay? We've gotta protect this country." Geo leaned forward in his chair and silently stared off into nothingness.

"..."

But it probably won't change anything—not the things that really need to change.

I began to form plans in my head, putting each piece together one by one.

What's the best way to resolve this? Which method do I choose? Can I do this?

There are no guarantees here. Some might think what I'm about to do is cruel. There are all kinds of elements I can't properly account for.

Liselotte Onik's right, though. She's exactly right. I won't know unless I try.

If I want the best results, this is the only way.

I left Geo's house and set out to walk the cobblestone path back to the castle alone.

“Welcome back, my master.”

Seras was sitting on the bed in our room of the castle.

“You do know you can just call me *Too-ka* now, right?”

“Are you sure?”

“We’re alone, aren’t we? I don’t sense anyone outside the door listening in on us.”

Perhaps because we’d earned a certain level of trust, there were no soldiers stationed at our door. Nyaki, Piggymaru, and Sleii were staying in another room nearby. There had been rooms where we could all stay together, but...

“Meow! Nyaki won’t get in Master’s way! Nyaki wants to stay in another room! Nyaki doesn’t want to stop Seras and Master from relaxing together!”

Nyaki had insisted that she be given a separate room, and so I assigned Piggymaru and Sleii to guard her.

Well, I also wouldn’t want Nyaki to be lonely in a room all by herself.

I took off my mask.

“So how did it go? Did you get to talk to Gratrah?” I asked.

“Yes. I now have a basic understanding of the different armies that each of the Four Shining Warriors lead.”

Seras and Gratrah aren’t voting tomorrow, so neither were trying to convince the other of anything—they must’ve been able to talk freely.

“Did it all go smoothly?” I asked.

“She has a serious disposition, but I believe she’s a very kind person at heart. She was standoffish toward us when we first met, but only because she thought we might pose a threat to the king.”

She’s also not great at expressing her feelings and admits that much herself, apparently.

Seras and Gratrah had a conversation over tea, and Seras filled me in on the details.

Aside from Gratrah's personal guard, there are:

The Band of the Shining Snake.

The Band of the Shining Dragon.

The Band of the Shining Leopard.

The Band of the Shining Horse.

These four armies are the country's main military strength, with about two hundred soldiers in each army.

"So they've got almost eight hundred soldiers total."

"I believe that number will increase if we include those who can fight but are not currently enlisted in one of the four armies."

"It's likely that some of the monsters are suited to fighting, yeah."

A whole country of demi-humans and monsters... It almost feels like a place from a game—the kingdom of some monster king.

Seras began to tell me of each army's strength—all of what she said corresponded to the information Geo had already given me.

"It sounds like Geo's the most capable commander they've got."

"According to Lady Gratrah, he is."

"All right. Thanks for all your hard work, Seras."

"How was your visit to Sir Geo's house?"

"I think I did what I needed to do," I said, sitting down on the bed next to her. "It all depends on how tomorrow plays out."

Seras gave a little wry smile and glanced over at me.

"Are you feeling tired?"

"A little...yeah."

"It's only natural. You haven't had a proper moment to rest today, Sir Too-ka."

"I took a break when I was eating."

Seras, Nyaki, and the others had eaten in the castle dining hall, but I spent the time alone in my room as I needed to remove my mask to eat.

“Have you taken a bath yet?”

“Not yeah, no,” I said before falling backward onto the bed. It felt incredibly soft.

Oh man... This feels so good, I might just fall asleep right now.

“Seras.”

“Yes?”

“I’m gonna sleep for a bit. Can you wake me up in thirty minutes?”

“You can go right to sleep now if you would prefer?”

“I’m not exactly feeling the cleanest I’ve ever been... I’d feel bad making you sleep in the same bed as me. I’ll take a bath after my nap.”

Seras turned her head toward me. “I don’t mind, you know?”

“But *I* mind.”

“Very well, I will wake you in thirty minutes.” She gave me another wry smile.

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“Not at all.”

“Hey, this isn’t much thanks, but feel free to kiss me while I’m asleep...”

Man, I’m sleepy.

“When you say it like that, I really will consider doing so, you know?”

“...Go ahead if you wanna. It’s not like I’ll ever run out of them...”

What’s a kiss matter now anyway? Our relationship is changing.

“We’ve taken a bath together, right?” Seras started to fidget.

“...What’s wrong?”

I’m sleepy.

“Actually, I... I haven’t taken a bath yet either,” said Seras.

My eyelids began to close.

“They have arranged it so that we may take our baths whenever we wish,” she continued quietly. “So if all depends on tomorrow’s vote,

then, tonight might we...take the time to bathe together?”

“...”

“...Ah, you have already fallen asleep, I see.”

I felt Seras get up off the bed and a blanket being pulled up to my chin.

“Seras...”

“Y-yes?!” she exclaimed in shock.

“Sure...we can take a bath together. Let me sleep a bit first.”

“Ah. Y-you were awake then, Sir Too-ka? V-very well—I will prepare the bath.”

At long last, I drifted off to sleep.



SERAS ASHRAIN

SERAS ASHRAIN was washing herself in the castle baths.

They had been told the castle's baths were the original ones left from the time when the Country at the End of the World was but an underground ruin, though they had been refurbished several times since then. The water was surprisingly clean, maintained by the ancient magical devices powering the city. Too-ka had bathed with her as promised but left a few minutes earlier, leaving her to shower alone. He'd explained that he wanted to be alone for a while before he departed.

Seras's eyes softened, and she placed both hands on her cheeks.

It wasn't that he would be too embarrassed to dress in the same room as me. Though I personally would feel a certain kind of embarrassment if I changed my clothes in front of him.

Whenever we enter baths together, he's always so... Sir Too-ka is not quite as emotionally affected by this as I am. I could never be as calm as he manages to remain in my presence. He did tell me that I should not misunderstand that as meaning he feels nothing for me. But when we're together, he doesn't show even a hint of sheepishness.

No, it is I who should follow his lead and not become so flustered. So I can be by his side, even in my current state of undress.

She reflected on their time together, each hour since the day they met. To her, this was all so new. When Seras lived in the Holy Empire of Neah, there was always a certain distance between her and members of the opposite sex. They would usually become shy in her presence or begin to fidget nervously. A good number clammed up entirely.

Wherever she went, Seras was gazed at by lovestruck eyes (though there were plenty of lecherous ones too). Cattlea had explained exactly why they were staring so often that it made Seras's ears hurt. She had just internalized it all as a fact of life and accepted it.

Though looking back, Cattlea's explanations had been somewhat biased...designed to save Seras from those wolves at court.

Too-ka Mimori, though...was different.

He complimented her appearance, but was never shy about doing so. He never blushed, never fidgeted. Seras could tell when a person was lying, and she knew that each time he complimented her it was coming from the heart. Before Seras even knew what was happening, the roles had been reversed. She learned what it was like to have a crush on someone. For her, these were all new experiences...

But now I almost feel as if I...I want to be the one making him feel nervous.

Most of all, Seras had never met a man she had such an understanding with. Her relationship with Cattlea was one thing, of course—but when it came to the opposite sex, Too-ka was the only man she had ever developed such a deep connection with.

She raised her head to let the cascading water run down her face. The raindrops burst as they bounced from her skin, forming droplets that slid down her cheeks. A sigh of hot breath escaped her lips, and she placed a hand to her chest.

This must be what it feels like to be in love...

It was nothing like the way Seras felt when she read love stories. She was moved by the characters and the tales they told...but there was something different about the way she felt now.

Too-ka Mimori wasn't in any of the books she read. There were no love stories written about him.

And she could actually talk to him.

She could smile at him.

She could touch him.

He can touch me.



Feeling that sweet shame hot on her cheeks, Seras left the castle baths.

I wonder if Sir Too-ka is asleep already...?

She walked quickly back to their room to find him still up, sitting on the edge of the bed and deep in thought. He gave a start as she entered, as if even he was surprised to still be up.

“You’re still awake, I see,” she said, brushing her still-damp hair from her face.

“Ah, yeah...” he replied, furrowing his brow. “I just have a lot on my mind... I don’t know the best thing to do. The general idea is there, but the details are still vague for me right now.”

“Are you tired then?”

“Nah, I feel a bit better after that nap. I think I’ll be up for a while longer... Can I do anything for you?”

“Eh?”

“I gave you a real workout sparring against the Four Shining Warriors today, didn’t I? There must be some kind of reward I can give you. I don’t know if it’s going to give us any of the sweet stuff you like, but we could try the magic pouch?”

“Well...if I might use y-your lap as a pillow...” she asked sheepishly, watching for Too-ka’s reaction as she spoke. “Might that be acceptable?”

“You sure that’s all you want?”

“Yes... It’s the reward I wish to request ...”

Too-ka hesitated for a few moments.

“You’re a weird one, Seras,” he said happily. “Well, if this is what you want.”

They moved across the room to a long sofa, laid down a blanket, and sat down side by side. Then Seras lay down neatly on her side and placed her head in Too-ka’s lap—one of her long ears folded down softly into the gap between his thighs.

“You really like that, huh?”

“Yes, I... I like it here. It relaxes me.”

When I'm here, I feel so wrapped up with joy.

Seras suddenly gasped with a realization. "Ah, I'm sorry—my hair is still damp..."

"It's fine, don't worry about it."

"...Understood. My apolog—ah!"

Too-ka's hand touched her ear. "Ah, my bad."

"N-no... You can touch my ear if you like. I'm just a little sensitive there."

But Too-ka didn't, to Seras's slight disappointment.

Still...being here makes me feel at peace.

She closed her eyes and felt him there. Through the blanket, she felt the warmth of his lap against her cheek. It smelled like him.

This is so comfortable...

Seras never dreamed she could feel so happy in surrendering herself to another—giving herself over to someone else. As Captain of the Holy Knights of Neah, there were times she had supported her subordinates, but they never could support her in the same way she did them.

Seras had never surrendered herself quite so completely to Cattlea in the same way; she had never been so defenseless with anyone before.

I can truly rest when I'm here. It's as if I can just forget about everything else, and—

"Ah."



She realized she had rolled over onto her back and was staring up at Too-ka—and he was looking down at her. All those relaxed feelings were gone in an instant, and her heart started pounding at breakneck speed. They were so close, looking into each other's eyes. Seras's face flushed with heat.

"Seras... Are you okay? You're sweating."

"I-I'm fine."

"You're bright red. Maybe it's because you just got out of the bath...or you're a bit embarrassed? You don't have a fever, do you?"

She quickly sat up.

"I-I really am fine, pl—?!"

Too-ka pressed his forehead to hers.

"Hey, I mean I've seen the cliché in romantic comedy manga. Everyone thinks the heroine is red 'cause she's blushing or something, and then it turns out she's just got a fever and she's actually sick..."

"Ah~!"

R-romantic comedy manga...? Whatever does he mean?

"Well...doesn't seem like your temperature's that high," said Too-ka.

Seras felt like she might blurt out that she did have a burning fever, just one of another kind. She averted her eyes and, unable to hide the redness of her cheeks, covered her forehead with both hands instead.

"S-Sir Too-ka..."

"Measuring someone's temperature with your own forehead...I guess I did kind of want to try that out too. I always wondered if it actually worked. Sorry, Seras. You're the only one I could really try this stuff out with... Sorry for experimenting on you like that."

I-I'm happy to be experimented on!

The thought flashed through the back of Seras's mind and sent her heartbeat racing ever further from the calm, soft way it had beat as she rested her head on his lap. She found more feelings of embarrassment welling up within her.

I can barely look Sir Too-ka in the eyes!

Lost in the moment, she buried her face in his chest.

“No fever, then... But are you sure you’re okay?”

Seras was silent for a time, her head still resting on Too-ka’s chest.

“I’m not...” she mumbled, knowing full well that her voice would betray her true feelings for him.

“I’m sorry... You’re sure you aren’t just feeling worn out or anything?”

“No. It’s not that.”

“All right. I’m glad to hear it.”

“I apologize for losing my composure earlier...” said Seras, a sincere expression on her face as she lay by Too-ka’s side in bed, both of them staring up at the ceiling. “It is unworthy of my position as a knight to become so panicked... Perhaps due to the incident with the worm, I have been neglecting my duties of late.”

“It doesn’t matter now, does it?”

“Eh?”

Seras turned her head to look at him. Too-ka was still staring up at the ceiling.

“You don’t have to be a knight of the Lord of the Flies Brigade when you’re relaxing before bed. Right now, you can just be Seras—no titles.”

“Ah...” She felt a pleasant tightness in her chest and lost the ability to speak for a moment.

Why does he affect me so...?

Both of them were silent.

Is he already asleep?

It took several tries for Seras to work up the courage to find Too-ka’s hand under the blankets. Her fingers touched his, searching them out... But she stopped short of going any further.

Then Too-ka took her hand in his and squeezed it.

He’s still awake.

“Th-thank you,” she whispered.

“Sure.”

With their fingers entwined, Too-ka soon dozed off. Seras felt his hand unclench in hers—he was finally completely asleep. She gently pulled her fingers away from his and let out a sigh.

The room was so quiet.

At times like these, she couldn't help but think about what would happen once Too-ka got his revenge. She looked over to see him sleeping, breathing softly right next to her.

He's always trying to be strong...to be a reliable person. He lets me lean on him like this. When I feel tired, he lets me in.

Ever since we came to this Country at the End of the World, he's been playing the “Lord of the Flies” role perfectly. For his age, he has such incredible mental fortitude. No matter what, Too-ka Mimori continues on.

That's why I want to see him through his journey—to the very end.

But if one day, he can't bear it any longer and stumbles, then I...I want to be strong for him. Strong enough that he can lean on me. I want to be capable of supporting him so that he can find the strength to walk his own path once more.

MIMORI TOUKA

THE NEXT MORNING, I awoke in darkness.

Seras was sleeping right there next to me, her body curled up with her shoulders exposed. Her breathing was so quiet.

Come to think of it...she does always breathe quietly while she sleeps.

I sat up in bed and pulled the blanket up and over her shoulders.

“...”

I felt refreshed by the good night's sleep, but morning chill had crept into the room when I got out of bed. I put on a jacket, checked my pocket watch, and looked over to the window. There was still some time left before the ancient magical devices powering the country began

to raise the morning light.

It was so quiet.

I know what I need to know. The pieces that need to move are already in motion.

“Right, then... I hope everything goes to plan.”

YASU TOMOHIRO

CLANK—

Yasu Tomohiro was awoken by a strange metallic sound he'd never heard before. He had been sleeping on his side, but it seemed he'd been jerked up into a sitting position, and there were hands grasping his shoulders.

“Nhmfh?!”

He was about to spit an angry “*What are you doing, you insolent fool?*” at whoever it was when he realized he couldn't talk properly—there was a metal mask-like device strapped to the bottom of his face.

He could still breathe through his nose but only barely through his mouth.

“Nhghhhh!”

They should've been near the capital of Ulza. When Yasu had fallen asleep, he was outside in the wild, a little way from the Sixth Order camp.

Didn't I set up traps to warn me of intruders like these?! Did I not hear them?

Yasu had tied twigs and bits of branches together with string and positioned his traps so that anyone whose legs became tangled in them would bring the twigs crunching together noisily. It was a trick he remembered from a movie he saw long ago.

“Are you kidding me with this stuff? Nobody in the Sixth Order would fall for blatant traps like these, hah!”

It was the voice of the vice-captain, Ferenoch. Yasu realized he

was surrounded by knights on all sides.

I-I'll never forgive them for this! I'll burn them to ashes!

"Lævateinn!"

But it only came out as "Nh—!" His skill didn't activate.

This infernal iron mask is blocking my mouth!

"Gfhh!"

With the stat modifiers of a hero, Yasu knew he should be much stronger than the other-worlders. He got to his feet and tried to strike at Ferenoch where he stood behind him, but his fist found only air.

"Is that all you've got, Hero?"

The other soldiers laughed.

Even Radice mocked him. *"Hah! What's the matter, honorable hero? Without your unique skill, this is all you've got?"*

Rage exploded within him—Yasu's head was boiling over with anger.

Cowards! Fools!

Yasu glared at their captain, Johndoe, who was sitting alone watching.

You'll pay if this gets back to the Goddess. Let me go now, and I might forget this ever happened. Order them to let me go—release the Hero of the Black Inferno!

Johndoe stood and walked over to him as if Yasu's thoughts had come through loud and clear. The other soldiers parted to let him through. He crouched before Yasu and then drew a shortsword from his belt with a backhanded grip, bringing it right up to Yasu's throat.

H-he... There's something different about him now...?!

There was a change in the air.

"Nhh?!"

"The Goddess said we could dispose of you if you became more trouble than you were worth... I see now why she sent you away."

It can't be!

I... Yasu Tomohiro was assigned a special mission. A mission only I could accomplish...

“You abandoned all your fellow heroes and ran away over the mere matter of a few severed fingers. And yet you don’t think the Goddess views you as a complete failure. Odd,” said Johndoe.

“...!”

“Perhaps you were only entrusted to our Sixth Order because she has already given up on you.”

Where’s he going with this?!

“It’s pathetic—humorous, even! You were deemed a hazard to the other heroes. Nothing more than an interference, it seems. I think it likely the Goddess believes they’ll be much more successful in taking down the Demon King without you.”

That can’t be. It can’t, it can’t, it can’t—it’s not possible!

“She gave us that mask to punish you with because she foresaw this eventuality. You cannot activate your skills with that thing strapped to your face... I would be uneasy about using such an item on an S-class hero with their high stat modifiers, but for one such as yourself...it appears to do the trick.”

There was no expression on Johndoe’s face. He was indifferent—terrifyingly so.

“Yeesh, man... Our cap’n just gets meaner and meaner th’ older he gets—”

“I try to restrain myself when dealing with matters such as these. It’s far more thrilling to beat down an opponent if there’s build-up leading up to it. A certain fall from grace is a dramatic touch, I think.”

“You’re a scary one. Seriously,” said Radice.

“You did well to contain yourself too,” Johndoe responded.

“Only ’cause I was terrified of what you might do. You really freak me out when you get upset, y’know.”

“Tomohiro Yasu.” Johndoe looked him in the eyes. There was no hatred there. He seemed normal—his eyes were those of a distracted passerby.

He was terrifying.

“You think us all complete idiots, do you not?”

“Mn!”

“I can see by the way you act. It’s not just us in the Sixth Order you look down upon, is it? It’s every single person who lives in this world.”

Johndoe pressed the blade lightly against his throat, and Yasu felt a thin needle prick of pain.

“Don’t underestimate us,” Johndoe continued. “It would be a waste to kill you so soon. You’re merely a side quest on our journey.”

The soldiers about him laughed sadistically, Ferenoch and Radice among them.

“But worry not,” Johndoe added lightly, “I shall make this trip one to remember.”

“Man, he’s gone to pieces already! Where’s that spunk from earlier?!”

“Lame... Captain, he ain’t gonna make it, I tell ya. Can’t even hear the kid cryin’ anymore...”

“Those fingers the golden-eyed monster severed from his hand—the Goddess reattached them, did she not?”

What are they talking about—?

“Take them back off.”

“Nng!”

“Whoa, seriously?!”

“Only the ones the Goddess reattached—no more.”

“Nhh! Ngh?! Nhhh—!”

“Oh, that got you worked up again, eh?” said one knight.

“Hold him down. Ferenoch, you take the fingers,” commanded Johndoe.

“Jeez, I hate making a mess, but I’ll do it.”

“Nhh—!!”

“*Ha ha!* I guess he’s got some energy left!”

“Too late for crying now.”

“Nhh-gh!! Nh-g! Nh-hh-ghh!!”

“Make sure the stumps get bandaged up proper once they’re off.”
Stop! Stop, stop, stooooop! Please! Stop! Stop, stop! Wawaaah?! Sto-

Slice—

I can feel every bump in the road.

Tied inside this sack, carried like luggage.

I think it’s Ferenoch who’s got me now.

“You gonna get us some results on this mission, Radice?” he asked.

“Heck yeah, I am! I hear even a demi-human like me can get to be a freakin’ baron if the Goddess likes the work I do here! She’s going to let me manage the demi-humans we capture in the Country at the End of the World too, I reckon...” Radice replied.

“The Goddess is generous with those that are obedient toward her—even if she’s intimidating to compensate for it,” said Johndoe.

“She’s intelligent, kind, and got that killer body too, right?”

“I wasn’t speaking of her outward appearance.”

“Hah... Don’t act like you haven’t noticed, Captain,” sighed Ferenoch.

“Well, she’s rational, at least. A strong ally, provided you never betray her.”

“You really think we’ll be okay splitting our forces when there’s still the Demon King to deal with?”

“The heroes will handle that. Excluding that one, of course.”

“...”

“Hey, still alive in there?”

There was a bolt of pain as someone struck Yasu through the sack.

“Uhnf!”

“Still kicking? Goddess’s blessing at work, maybe?”

“Captain, ain’t we gonna kill him yet?”

“Kill him? Don’t be absurd. It would be such a terrible waste to do

so.”

“Really? But Cap...”

“My, my. Who’s this?”

MESSENGER OF THE GODDESS

THEY WERE FINALLY HERE—the Sixth Order of Knights.

The man was a messenger of the Goddess, and he had been waiting for them in Monroy, capital city of Ulza, for days...all to hand them the orders of the Goddess he’d received by magical war pigeon.

The messenger met them just outside the main gate to Monroy and gave them their new orders.

“Hmpf. I see. So the Wildly Beautiful Emperor’s started a rebellion?” Captain Johndoe said.

“Eh?!”

The messenger almost jumped out of his skin.

Has he been standing there this whole time?

The Captain was just as inconspicuous as the rumors told. Without his armor, Johndoe would have seemed like just another ordinary citizen walking the streets of Monroy.

“I-incidentally, it appears there is blood seeping from that sack you are carrying... What is inside, might I ask?” inquired the messenger.

“Don’t worry about it,” replied Johndoe.

“Ah, well... If there have been any significant changes, I should report them to the Goddess...”

“You haven’t been a messenger of hers long, have you now?”

“In fact... Eh?”

He looked down—there was a shortsword in his stomach. The pain came after. It was only then that he realized he’d been stabbed.

“Nngh?! Captain Johndoe, wh-what are you...?!”

“I said it’s nothing of importance.”

A chill ran through the messenger’s spine—a pure sense of terror he’d never felt before in his life. The man before him was so normal, but...he was too terrified of him to even speak.

“The wound isn’t deep. Go and get it treated immediately. And with regards to that sack you mentioned,” Johndoe repeated himself for the third time.

“It is nothing of importance.”

YASU TOMOHIRO

HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN? *I can’t remember.*

I feel pieces disappearing, things that were once a part of me. My body...it itches. All I know is that I’m still alive.

In the haze of Yasu Tomohiro’s consciousness, he began to think it strange that he was even living at all.

“We’re at the outskirts of the Land of the Golden-eyed Monsters now, yeah?” came a voice from somewhere outside the sack.

“What’s Mira think they’re playin’ at anyway? Hang on. What’s that over there...?”

“Looks like some corpses...”

“This guy, that guy... You really think they’re all Sword of Courage?!”

“The corpses are so eaten by monsters it’s hard to tell...but I believe so.”

“Sword of Courage? You mean to say *Lewin Seale*’s been defeated? Impossible.”

“But by *who*...?”

“Hmm... The corpses we discovered over there were wearing the armor of Monster Slayer Knights, no?”

“Yeah, Cap, that was Monster Slayer Knight gear all right...”

“It’s clear the two must have fought. And this seems to be the sword that the leader of their group was using. The crest on the sword guard appears to have been scuffed away.”

“So, like, what are you gettin’ at?”

“Setting their armor aside...men prefer to use the weapons they are familiar with.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“These swords are the ones this group would have always used, but they have scratched off the crests to hide their true identities.”

“So, like...they wore Monster Slayer Knight gear to attack the Sword of Courage? But, like, how’d they get stronger than the Sword of Courage to begin with?”

“If this was the work of the Wildly Beautiful Emperor or the Band of the Sun, it is possible.”

“The emperor was here?!”

“It’s possible. But the crests on these swords... I might be able to discern what they were before they were tampered with. A lion...and a lily flower...the crests given to Mira’s Band of the Sun.”

“I see. So...Mira, then?”

“We came here to crush the Country at the End of the World, of course, but this...? I don’t like how this situation is shaping up. To think that Mira is powerful enough to overcome the Sword of Courage...”

“Seems like the fifth and ninth orders are moving about nearby... Should we send them a message?”

“No. There’s no need to inform them yet. If the Wildly Beautiful Emperor is in the area, this gives us a perfect chance.”

The group was no longer concerned with Yasu at all. He was luggage, just a part of the background. Maybe they had forgotten about his presence altogether. Johndoe’s casual tone carried across the forest into the sack that Yasu was bound inside.

“That said, if the Sword of Courage was no match for our new opponents, we should proceed with a little caution.”

Chapter 4:

Brushing Away the Fly

“**S**IR BELZEGEA, His Majesty has asked for you.”

A harpy called with the message just after I'd finished eating breakfast in my room. I recognized from her armor that she was one of the armed personal guards of King Zect.

I checked the time, then put my pocket watch away.

Sounds like the results of the vote are in.

Seras and I followed the harpy back to the room where we'd met with the Seven Lights the day before. All eyes turned in our direction as soon as we entered. Everything was as it had been yesterday—aside from the expressions on the faces of those who sat before us. King Zect lightly raised his hand from his seat at the head of the table.

“As to whether we will resolve our situation through discussion or battle—a decision has been reached.”

“What has been decided?” I asked.

“There were two votes for battle—Geo and Kil. For resolving the matter through peaceful discussion, there were three votes—Liselotte, Cocoroniko, and Amia.”

Lise looked over at me, a self-satisfied smile on her face. “Thus, this nation of ours will henceforth do everything in its power to negotiate with those who march against us. While this result was not unanimous, the decision must be respected. I wish for us all now to let bygones be bygones and unite to carry out the negotiations to come.”

Geo stood at the table in silence, his arms folded over his chest.

“You accept this, Geo? Please. We are counting on you as well,” said the king.

“I... Yes. There's a lot I want to say right now, but I had my say in the vote. I have to accept these results.”

“I'm counting on your leopardman eyesight and hearing as well, you know?” said Lise. “I know you don't like the decision we made today, but let's cooperate moving forward, okay? Do you accept?”

“Yeah...”

“I’m counting on you as well, Kil.”

Kil shrugged in response. “I expected Geo might get violent... But if he’s backin’ down and acceptin’ the results, I guess I’d better too.”

“I’m going to be counting on the strength of the centaurs as well.”

“We are at your service, Lady Prime Minister.”

“Are you being sarcastic with me, using such formalities?”

“It ain’t sarcasm. Just bein’ a sore loser.”

“Very well. Oh, and I’m ever so glad to see that Niko and Amia understand how right I am about this situation. I thank you both.”

“There is the matter of my debt to you. In addition, I respect your position as prime minister,” said Cocoroniko.

Cocoroniko’s vote went as expected, as did Geo’s and Kil’s. The sole person whose decision we couldn’t read...

“Many of us lamiae have infant children right now, yeah? And lots of us are in the army. If we have to fight, a lot of kids are going to be orphans. If there’s a way to make it through this without any loss of life, that’s for the best. Personally, I don’t have any kids, so I’d be willin’ to fight... But with the numbers we’re up against, we’d need all the help we could get.”

“Worry not, Amia.” Lise puffed out her chest emphatically. “I will not let anybody die. I promise I shall resolve this matter through peaceful means, no matter what.”

Geo turned to look at her. “What of the armies?”

“They will be disbanded as planned. We will retain only the king’s personal guards as a fighting force.”

“Are you serious...?”

“We demi-humans and monsters have always been viewed as a threat by humans. We must take steps to demonstrate our lack of hostility—to prove that we mean them no harm.”

Disbanding their military...she can’t see it any other way.

“We may soon be inviting these people into our country. With that in mind, I should like to eliminate all factors that might make our community appear dangerous. There are already certain monsters in

this country who appear violent even without weapons in their hands. We must show our sincerity, show that we are a peaceful people.”

Lise scuttled up to the door and stood before me.

“And, well...that is how it is going to be. No complaints, I take it?”

“The decision today was reached fairly, following proper procedure. I am also not a citizen of this country. I have given my advice, and it has been rejected—I have no right to complain about the agreement you have reached among yourselves.”

“That’s right. You’re just an outsider. Perhaps now you understand?”

“Understand what?”

“Your place.”

I bet it was Lise who called me here in the first place.

There was complete victory written all over her face.

“I was right, and you were wrong!” she must think. But Liselotte Onik’s so right it hurts. She’s right—she won, fair and square. It wasn’t unfair of her to go and talk Amia into joining her last night. It’s not unfair to try to convince someone of something.

After a while, she seemed to grow tired of my lack of response.

“Enough. You should go,” she said forcefully. “Too bad you couldn’t deceive and manipulate us all, eh?”

“...”

“We need to hurry and discuss our next moves, you see. It’s no discussion for the ears of hotblooded *outsiders* such as yourselves.”

“That’s enough, Lise,” said Geo reprovingly. “The man may be an outsider, but he’s still our guest.”

“Yeah, I think that was a bit far too, y’know,” added Amia.

Lise pouted angrily and averted her eyes. “All I did was tell the truth.”

“No... It is as you say, I am but an outsider here. If there is a way of resolving this issue without shedding blood, then I agree it is your best course of action. I sincerely wish you luck in the negotiations to come.”

I bowed to the Seven Lights.

“Well, then, I take my leave.”

The smarter a person believes that they are, the more single-mindedly they work to justify their own arguments with logic...until at last they name the thing they've struck upon as the “right answer.” Some people call that overconfidence.

But I'm the same, aren't I?

I believe too strongly in the conclusions I come to.

In the end, isn't all this just two different kinds of overconfidence butting heads with each other?

Until we get some real results, we'll never know the true answer... We'll never know whose logic was justified all along.

The next day, I requested an audience with King Zect. This time we met in his throne room, not the usual large meeting hall. The immortal king sat on his throne with Gratrah behind him at his right hand. The Four Shining Warriors were nowhere to be seen.

“I have accomplished my goal in this country. With your decision to negotiate with the encroaching forces, and Lise-dono's statement that any who appear to be soldiers are a liability...I do not believe my companions and I should remain.”

“I apologize for driving you out under such circumstances.”

“But Lise-dono's wishes must be followed, I assume?”

“Hmph. She believes you to be the cause of unnecessary conflict. She thinks that Geo and Kil's decision to vote for battle was due to your influence. I apologize.”

“No, it is true that I may have provoked that reaction in them... She's correct in her assessment. I believe her decision is the right one.”

“I wish to trust them, to entrust the future of this country to them...the arachne have contributed so much to our home.”

“In the end, we all have to make our own choices. I have no say in the direction this country chooses to take. With regards the Kurosaga, however...”

“Just as you asked, our country will keep them safe until the time is right—I give you my word. Please come back for them, and do not worry. When that time comes, I will grant you reentry. Gratrah.”

“Yes.”

At the king’s word, she came before me and handed me a key of the same kind that Erika had given me.

“If the divine beast is to stay with us, you will need this key to enter our nation once more.”

“I’m grateful—but are you sure? Are these keys not precious to your people?”

“With the coming of the divine beast, we will need far fewer of these in the future. Please do not worry about Miss Nyaki. I will ensure she is able to live peacefully here. I swear it.”

“Thank you... I leave her in your care.”

Gratrah returned to her place by King Zect’s side.

“Will you be leaving at once?” he asked.

“Yes. We do not have much time.”

“I understand. I hope that the next time we meet my country will have been reborn and that we can join hands with you humans. I wish to believe that such a future is possible. And if you get the chance... please tell Mistress Erika how deeply grateful I remain to her for everything she has done for me and my people.”

I left the throne room and made my way back to our rooms. I found Seras, Nyaki, and Slei waiting in the bedroom when I returned.

“Let’s go.”

“Understood.”

“Pakyuh.”

“Master...” Nyaki looked up at me uneasily.

I took off my mask and looked her in the eyes. “Don’t worry. I’m sure everything’s going to be fine.”

“Ah. Nyaki feels...”

“I’m not gonna say goodbye, okay?”

Nyaki nodded. “...Meow. Nyaki really, *really* wishes you luck.”

There were tears in her eyes.

Man, this girl.

My mouth curled into a genuine smile, and I stroked her head. “Stay strong.”

“Ny-Nyaki’s a member of the Lord of the Flies Brigade! Nyaki won’t ever forget it!”

“That’s what I like to hear,” I said as I put my mask back on.

We walked out of the castle and exited the grounds through the front gate. Nyaki came with us that far. We began our descent down the gentle slope. I turned around once to see Nyaki still watching us, waving from just outside the castle walls.

That’s just like her.

I looked up at the battlements—there were other faces there watching us as well.

Geo Shadowblade.

I raised my hand, and he raised his in response.

We passed through the city streets and finally reached the tunnel leading back up to the surface. I turned around, taking in one last full view of the underground kingdom.

We went up the staircase and came to the silver door to the outside. I placed the key in the hollow, and the door began to open.

I guess the key isn’t consumed when you open this door from the inside—just from the outside.

As the door opened wide, it felt like it had been ages since I’d had sunlight in my eyes.

“I’d really like to just go and crush those Thirteen Orders of Alion or whatever they’re called right now.”

But with Lise in the picture, that doesn't seem possible. And there are other things we need to do now.

"Right, then... Let's do what we can, shall we?"

With that, we left the Country at the End of the World.

A CERTAIN MARRIED COUPLE

"D_{EAR...}"

"Don't worry. This'll go well, I'm sure of it."

"Ah, it's not that. I'm...I'm pregnant."

"Really?!"

"Yes... I'm sorry. I know this isn't the best time."

"Tch... Wish you coulda told me sooner is all."

"I wanted to surprise you. I was actually going to tell you later."

"The timing isn't great, that's true. But hey...I'm happy to hear it!"

"Geo... You will come back safe, won't you?"

"Course I will. They don't call me the strongest of all the Four Shining Warriors for nothin'. I'm coming back to you."

"Honestly, I want to go with you too."

"After what you just told me? Not a chance."

"You're right... Good luck in the battle, sweetheart."

"I'm going to come back. For you. For the baby you're carrying. I swear it."

LISELOTTE ONIK

FOR LISELOTTE ONIK, the busy days of work had only just begun. First, she had to dispatch messengers to the Goddess's forces heading

toward them—she needed to express their lack of hostility toward the approaching army.

“When people come in and out, Nyaki should open and close the door?” asked Nyaki.

“That’s your job, yes. Well, do that well and I suppose I can call it a job.”

“Meow, Nyaki understands!”

The number of keys we possess is limited, but now that we have a divine beast, we no longer need to consume them when opening the door to our country. That fly who brought her here—that is the only thing he has done well for us.

Lise had been working hard since the vote was settled, setting all members of the Onik Clan to the task of their upcoming negotiations with the outside world.

I must also discuss the “reeducation” of the Four Shining Warriors. We must correct their warmongering tendencies—Geo and Kil in particular.

There was a mountain of things to do, and Liselotte Onik did everything she could herself. Failure was unacceptable.

I expect these negotiations will take several trips to accomplish completely.

The Onik Clan was central to the nation’s government, and the arachne were the ones who maintained the ever-important ancient magical devices which kept the country running. Lise was aware of the food shortages and the deteriorating state of these devices, of course. Their country *had* to open to the outside.

That meant it was likely that the Goddess’s forces weren’t the only ones she was going to have to negotiate with.

There will be other nations as well. I must explain to the humans that we are not a danger to them. I can do this. No matter who I come up against, I will resolve the matter without a single drop of blood spilled.

I simply could not allow that fly to suggest we resort to bloodshed. He tried to use us.

For three days, Lise sent harpy messengers out into the world.

We have decided to open this country to the outside... There is a danger that we will be found, but the time has come to accept that risk.

Lise devoted all her time and energy to looking toward the future of the Country at the End of the World as she waited for a response from her messengers. It had been three days, but there were some who had yet to return. She had also yet to receive any reports of a human army marching toward them through the forest.

Meaning that there is a high likelihood that the Goddess's forces are still far from here.

We have time to prepare. There's still so much to do.

Lise began sleeping and eating less as she focused entirely on the work at hand.

"Prime Minister Lise!" An arachne burst into her room, panting and out of breath—it was Idatah Onik.

"Whatever is the matter, Idatah? I'm sorry, but I've been quite busy these past few days and have grown a little tired... I was planning on resting a while—"

"Th-they've disappeared!" Idatah interrupted her.

"Ahem... You're going to have to give me more than that. Who has disappeared?"

"Geo Shadowblade and Kil Mail... The Band of the Shining Leopard and Horse... They're gone!"

Before Idatah had even finished speaking, Lise was rising from her chair. "What do you mean, *gone*?!"

"I think they must have moved in the night—nobody noticed them leaving!"

Impossible... They're disobeying our country's decision? Do they intend to leave us for good because they didn't get their way?

"Ah!" Lise's eyes opened wide, and she let slip a gasp of shock. "This will never do."

"Prime Minister Lise, what is the m—"

"Idatah!" Lise shouted over her.

"Y-yes!"

"Send for the Band of the Shining Dragon and Snake at once! But don't let them arm themselves! Under no circumstances are they to

carry weapons! Is that understood?! Also summon Loa and the other great wolves!”

“U-understood! The soldiers, though... Do you intend on going after Geo and Kil?!”

“Of course I do!”

“If we are to go out and search, then perhaps we might contact Gratrah and have her personal guard looking as well?”

“You’re right! Order Gratrah out with her harpies! But ensure that they—”

“Are unarmed, understood!” Idatah finished Lise’s sentence.

“I see you follow my thinking! Now, hurry! Before it’s too late!”

Sensing the grave nature of the situation, Idatah rushed from the room, and Lise followed soon after.

This is not good—not good at all! Geo and Kil are no doubt marching out to do battle. They’ve gone to fight the Goddess’s forces before we can even begin our negotiations with them. They must have been moving in the shadows, preparing this for days.

Lise and the other arachne had been so busy, they’d had no time to spare to keep an eye on them.

Geo, Kil... They never accepted the results of the vote, did they? I was wrong!

But perhaps there was no predicting this outcome. The people of this country have always respected the results of democratic decisions. Everyone! Without exception! The decisions we Seven Lights reach with our votes are final—they are law. How else are we to rule?

Why is this happening?! Why have they all changed...!

Lise knew the answer.

The fly... It’s that fly. It’s unfortunate he is an acquaintance of Anael’s. I should never have respected that. I should have driven him out sooner.

Lise rushed through the castle, at times using her threads to take shortcuts, sticking web to pillars within the castle hallways and propelling herself quickly, arching through the air. It allowed her to take staircases in an instant, and it was much faster than running.

I must hurry.

She left the castle gates. The great wolves were gathering nearby.

With their speed, we might just be able to catch them.

Lise assembled her forces while still on the move, and quickly reached the silver door to the country.

“These tracks on the ground... And in such numbers... They’re already outside.”

“Idatah, what of the keys?” asked Lise

“Y-yes,” came her reply.

“Were any missing from our stock?”

“None—aside from the one granted to Belzegea when his party left.”

Lise scanned the area. “That divine beast is nowhere to be seen. She should be on standby in this area...”

Was she planning on betraying us too, right from the start? I cannot make that assumption now. Perhaps she was threatened by Geo or Kil.

But at present we have other priorities. We must go after them. The great wolves are faster than the centaurs, and I am sure they will be able to catch up.

The three-headed hound of Hades stood before her, leader of the great wolves—his name was Loa.

“Loa, let me ride you.”

“Going after them, are we?” he asked. Loa could speak not only to great wolves but to others as well—though only through the mouth of his central head.

“Even if I’m the only one that reaches them, we have to go! Do you understand, Loa?! Follow their scent! Their tracks!”

“As you order.”

Lise used her thread to leap onto Loa’s back and attach herself firmly to him so she wouldn’t fall off. She narrowed her eyes as she looked around.

“Tch. Amia! You’re hiding a shortsword behind that shield of yours, aren’t you?!”

“I know you told us not to bring weapons, but I thought that might be a bit dangerous, is all,” Amia replied.

“No! Your shield will be quite sufficient! There is no need to attack! Do you so wish to see those newborn lamia mothers and their infants dead?! Leave it there! And you other lamia knights are to follow her example!”

Amia threw the sword she had been hiding to the ground and gave orders to the others to do the same. The hard sound of clanging metal filled the air.

Lise scrutinized Amia ever more closely.

“Amia, what are those?!”

Amia opened the small leather pouch to show her. “Yeah, these are sound spheres.”

Sound spheres were magical devices, which, as the name suggested, would emit a sound once a certain amount of mana had been poured into them.

“We might get split up out there. We’ll need these to signal each other. Don’t you have some of these yourself, Miss Lise? You’re being a bit oversensitive about all this, aren’t you?”

“You...may be correct. My apologies, Amia.” Lise wiped the sweat from her forehead.

Perhaps it’s fatigue... But she’s right. I am not thinking clearly. I must pull myself together.

Lise took a deep breath, then raised her voice to give orders to the soldiers around her.

“Lamiae and dragonkin, mount as many great wolves as you can! Harpies, search from the sky! Report to me as soon as you locate Geo, Kil, or any individuals that appear to belong to the Goddess’s forces. Idatah—open the door!”

“Y-yes!”

Idatah placed a key into the hollow, and the door opened. Lise took the key from her, and the moment it was in her hands, Loa sped off like a bullet. The great wolves and harpies followed behind her.

I’m going to stop them. I have to. If they find the humans before we get to them... I’ll explain everything! I’ll explain that we aren’t their enemies. I’ll

convince Geo and the others not to lay a finger on them.

One doubt remained, swirling around in the back of Lise's head.

Why did they do this?! Why, why, why?!

If only they'd let me negotiate, everything would've gone smoothly...I could have wrapped all this up without incident!

Lise sped like the wind through the valley, riding on Loa's back. She kept her eyes firmly on the path before her, and Loa sped like an arrow beneath her—

There!

Lise listened for the sound.

Are those hooves? The centaurs? Is that Kil out there?

Loa made a sudden stop, his front paws scraping against the ground and sending dust up into the air. Lise felt several shadows approaching—they were just out of her vision but closing in fast.

“Those are—” Her eyes opened wide. “It can't be... Humans?!”

A group of humans riding horses approached her—all of them were armed.

They're already here.

Lise turned back to see the pack of great wolves not far behind her. The harpies were in the sky above them too, a little behind the pack.

Her mind raced.

“Loa, return to them! Take them back to the door!”

“Return?!”

“You can see what's happening, can't you?! Those humans over there are likely the forces of the Goddess! If they see you, they'll think you're dangerous. Take our forces and retreat! Except the Band of the Shining Snake...”

Lamiae upper bodies look half-human—they might be somewhat relatable to these people.

“Have them come to me!”

The humans had stopped—they seemed to be discussing something.

They’ve noticed our presence.

Lise’s heart was pounding hard and fast—her own heartbeat sounded deafening in her ears. She could not fail—but she felt like she had been thrown into the performance cold, with no time to even rehearse.

I was supposed to be ready for this!

“...”

“—ister—”

“...”

“Prime minister!”

“Ah!”

At Loa’s words, she was pulled from her racing thoughts right back to reality.

“Are you sure I should return to the others?”

“Y-yes! Who exactly do you think I am?! I am the Prime Minister of this nation, Liselotte Onik!”

“I...am aware.”

Lise jumped to the ground, and Loa withdrew to meet up with the other great wolves. The lamiae and dragonkin got off their great wolf mounts as Loa called to the harpies. Soon, all except the lamia began their retreat.

Now the pieces are in place.

She turned back to face the humans. They were moving too—coming closer. Amia and the other lamiae arrived at Lise’s side.

“Prime Minister.”

“Amia, have you prepared the white flag?”

“Ah... Yeah, just as you asked.”

This should tell the humans we mean them no harm—at least I think that is the gesture’s meaning in their society. I wonder if it will be properly understood. Perhaps we should have asked that fly about it.

Lise raised her voice and tried to call out to them, but it was no use—they were too far away, and her voice didn't reach their ears. From afar, she could see the wound crossbows in their hands—archer knights.

Lise stood at the head of the lamiae and raised her white flag.

They've...lowered their bows...?!

Lise's chest began to beat with excitement.

Then the humans raised a white flag of their own.

They've understood! They know we have no hostility toward them.

Lise held a hand up in the air, never taking her eyes off the humans in front of her.

"Band of the Shining Snake, wait here on standby."

"At least let me go with you. You'd be too open and undefended."

"There is meaning behind my openness! This is a once in a lifetime chance, you understand?! We must hurry! Luckily, it seems they have yet to encounter Geo and the others! We must quickly negotiate with them and explain that there is no need to fight! There's not a moment to lose!"

"I do think it's strange that they haven't fought with Geo."

"What are you getting at?"

"Do you think it's possible..." For once, Amia's hands were trembling. "What if those humans met Geo on the way toward us, and they've already..."

"Don't assume the worst of them right at the outset! Get ahold of yourself, Amia Plum Lynx! There's no way to know that for certain, is there?! We have to trust these humans!"

"Lise...I don't think I could forgive them, y'know? If those humans out there have killed Geo or Kil..."

Lise slapped Amia across the cheek.

"Get it together! That would be all the more reason for us to negotiate! We have to explain to them that we aren't like Geo and Kil! To tell them that those two ignored our rules and left our country! We have to be sincere!"

"I...will remain by your side, Prime Minister."

“I told you already, I’m going alone!” Lise turned and took another deep breath.

It’s okay. They raised a white flag. They mean us no harm. The stage is set for negotiation now.

Lise walked toward them, her flag still high in the air. A single knight began to proceed in her direction as well. His armor was clearly distinct from the rest, and he appeared to be in a position of authority over the other knights.

Might he be one of those “nobles,” perhaps?

He approached her until they were only a few meters apart, then closed in even further. They were face to face at last. The man was on horseback, so Lise had to look up at him. He wasn’t wearing a helmet, and his armor appeared lighter than that of the other knights. His hair was a dark chestnut brown. His eyes were somewhat drooping, but Lise could tell that with his well-proportioned features and slight air of sophistication, he might even be considered handsome.

He appears to be in his late twenties or early thirties, perhaps? He is not as muscular as Geo, but the man is well built.

“Excuse me. It would be rude to speak to you from the back of my horse,” said the man in a gentle tone of voice. He dismounted, fitting his white flag into the saddle before turning to Lise once more and bowing gracefully.

“My name is Michaela Eucalyon. I am the second son of the House of Eucalyon, from the Kingdom of Alion. I serve as commander of the Thirteen Orders of Alion and captain of the First Order of Knights. Now then...with your raising of a white flag, I see that you are no mere monster—nor do you have the customary golden eyes. I believe you are people of the Country at the End of the World. Am I correct?”

Lise gave a sigh of relief. The man was mild mannered—he was large but not intimidating.

He even considerably dismounted his horse—he must be a kind human indeed.

“I’m... That is to say, I serve as Prime Minister of the Country at the End of the World. My name is Liselotte Onik, an arachne. First, allow me to thank you for understanding the meaning of our white flag. What can I do for you?”

Michaela looked taken aback.

“Ah! To hear you speak so fluently and with such grace... I apologize, but it surprises me somewhat. That is to say nothing of your beauty...”

Lise’s cheeks flushed hot at the unexpected compliment.

I cannot. He will think me far too easily manipulated.

Michaela gave her a smile which might have even been meant as affectionate.

“You sent out harpy messengers toward us, did you not?” he asked.

“Eh? Ah, yes.”

“They explained to us your desire to negotiate, and that is why we have come. We heard that you wish to resolve your conflicts through discussion, not through battle. Upon hearing from them, we rushed here at once to meet with you.”

“I-I see.”

They received our messages.

It was then that Lise noticed the direction that Michaela was looking in. He was staring past her at something over Lise’s shoulder.

“Sir Michaela?”

“Those individuals back there... Are they lamiae?”

“Yes. Oh, please do not worry. They are not violent creatures.”

“I see no weapons to speak of. Do they use offensive magical devices, perhaps?”

“No, I have brought them here with only their shields—nothing more.”

“Th-they are not armed?!”

Michaela was taken aback once more, letting slip a gasp that sounded quite out of place.

Perhaps he is even more naive than he first appears... A little endearing, even.

“Deliberately so, yes. I wish to communicate during our negotiations that we have no hostility toward you. We have weapons

but have left them behind to come and speak with you, along with all the monsters in our number who might be misunderstood as having hostile intent...”

Lise explained her country’s pacifism and the betrayal of Geo and Kil—she told the human that they had turned their backs on their own nation’s decision. Michaela listened attentively, nodding along like an innocent young student.

“I see, to think you would go so far... It surprises me. I knew not that there were such wise individuals living in the Country at the End of the World...Mistress Liselotte.”

Michaela approached her and held out his hand for her to shake. Lise took his hand and squeezed it firmly. He looked at her with sincerity in his eyes and squeezed back.

I was not wrong.

Lise was absolutely sure of that now.

That fly thought that none of these people could be trusted...but he only believed that because they were a nuisance to him. This was a close call. We almost fell for his honeyed words and did something that could never be undone.

Lise raised her head and smiled.

“I have always dreamed of meeting a human like this—of the day we might stand hand in hand together.”

“Yes... To be honest, I am quite amazed too. I had no idea the people of the Country at the End of the World...” Michaela said, eyes softening as he smiled back at her, “would be so unbelievably stupid.”

...Eh?

What did he just say? Unbelievable—

“Wahh?!”

Lise was pushed down to the ground with terrifying force. She felt strong, muscular arms firmly around her. A chill ran up her spine. She heard a cry of “Prime Minister!” from Amia some way behind her.

“S-Sir M-Mich-aela... Wh-what a-are y... Y-you’re hurt-ing m...”

She didn’t have a clear idea of what was happening to her. Her brain couldn’t keep up with it—couldn’t comprehend the situation.

Eh? What? What's happening? What's happening to me? Sir Michaela? This kind human is...? Why?!

Why?!

He looked down at her with emotionless eyes, and Lise shivered with fear. Michaela raised his hand—it looked to be some kind of signal to the others. Lise heard hooves as the other knights drew closer.

“That’s far enough, lamia. One more step and I’ll kill this prime minister of yours.” His voice had been so gentle, but now its tones were cold and cruel—terrifyingly so.

He began to rummage through Lise’s belongings.

“That it? Ah...yeah, this is the one.”

The key. The key to open our silver door.

“If we’ve got this thing, we don’t even need to call in the Sixth Order, eh? That lot... They treat that divine beast almost like it’s one of them. With this, we don’t even need that thing anymore.”

Lise was hyperventilating, but she somehow managed to calm her breathing just enough to speak.

“S-Sir Micha-ela!”

“Hmm?”

“This is a...a misunderstanding...! It must be...”

“A misunderstanding? You’re the one who doesn’t understand what’s happening here.”

“You two must’ve had quite the conversation, Sir Michaela,” another of the knights called out to him as he rode up.

“This lot are acting more human than I expected them to.”

“My, is that a lamia over there? Quite a beauty.”

“What, you’re into lamiae?”

“No, but...”

Lise felt his lecherous gaze upon her—it made her skin crawl.

“This one with the lower body of a spider isn’t too bad either.”

“Human girls do get boring, yeah? I want to taste a demi-human—that’s the whole reason I came on this mission in the first place.”

“Especially when it comes to *sub*-humans like these, we really

don't have to hold back... Not like when you're doin' it to another human. No need to show any mercy, right?"

"The ones with the human parts will fetch a good price. Country at the End of the World is like a treasure trove of goodies for us to take."

Lise was shocked.

But I have to be strong—I must.

"L-let us talk about this! I'm sure we can reach an understanding! We are all fine people in the Country at the End of the World! It's not too late to talk! Let's forget about all this—water under the bridge! If we just work to understand each other, I'm sure we can join hands!"

"I'd rather join other parts."

"Eh...?"

"I'm asking if we can screw."

"Wh-what...?"

What is this human saying?

"Sexual intercourse between humans and arachne... You know, mating. Is it possible?"

"Wa—wh—what in the world are you trying t—?!"

Michaela punched her in the face, his body still pressing all of his weight down on her from above.

"Let me ask that again."

Lise felt a sharp pain in her nose.

"You and I, for example—could we have sex?"

"E-enough of this nonsense! Do you even know what you're saying?! Get off me!" Lise felt something snap within her. She lost control. "Quickly now! Talking with you is hopeless! Send out someone more serious that I can nego—aagh?!"

He punched her in the face again—and again, bringing his fists down one after the other.

"Gah, ghh— St-sto... Gh! Please, sto—gh..."

The beating stopped.

"Please, stop—please... Sto—sob... I'm s-sorry... So please... Don't

hit me... *Waaah...* I can't t-take it... *Waaahh...*"

"I'm only asking one more time. Is it possible?"

Lise's face was covered in blood and tears as she tried desperately to make herself as small as she possibly could.

"I d-don't know... I've never done it, so I...I'm sorry... Don't hit me..."

Lise was absolutely terrified, begging for mercy in between her sobs. Michaela let out a short sigh at her response.

"What, you can't answer a simple question, and you're meant to be the prime minister of this place? Useless trash. Well, I suppose I can keep you as a pet until I get bored. Consider it an honor—this is mercy."

Suddenly, a ringing sound filled the air—it was almost deafening.
Sound spheres...?

"What's that, a signal?"

"Let her go... Let our prime minister go."

It was Amia's voice.

"You. Take off your clothes."

"...What?"

"Sub-humans like you have got some nerve, dressing yourselves up like that. Strip!"

"Y-you...!"

With a woosh and a clank, a single bolt rebounded off of Amia's shield—fired by one of the archer knights behind Michaela.

"That's a surprise. She blocked it."

"I think that thing just now was a sound sphere. She probably just sent a message to her allies."

"A signal to her friends that the negotiations have broken down. The armed sub-humans and repulsive monsters will be on their way. This is where the real fight begins."

"We might be able to use their prime minister as a hostage."

"*Hah!*"

"What?"

“Nothing... It’s just, calling this sub-human monster a *prime minister* is...pathetic. It’s hilarious”

“I know, right?”

Lise could say nothing—she couldn’t speak. She was terrified. But a terrible sinking feeling was pulling her down, and she couldn’t bear not knowing any longer. She choked out one question.

“M-messeng-ers...?”

“Oh? What’re you saying now?”

“...Our m-messengers... Wh-what happened to them...?”

“Oh, we killed them. Shot them out of the sky. If we’d known how harmless they were, we would’ve captured them and had a bit of fun first.”

“Ghh... Sob...”

I’m sorry... It’s all my fault... It’s all because of me...

“Ah, right, right—Sir Michaela. We just received a message from the other orders advancing behind us.”

“Anything worth hearing?”

“Those leopardmen the Sixth Order reported they’d found have almost all been wiped out. I hear a few of them are still on the run, but the large black panther believed to be the leader has already been eliminated.”

It can’t be—Geo...?!

“They say they’ve removed his head... I imagine they intend on presenting it to the Goddess as a trophy, knowing that Sixth Order lot.”

“Sob...”

G-Geo...

“What of the centaurs mentioned in the earlier report?”

“They’ve been almost completely routed as well, I hear.”

“Tch, that blasted Sixth Order. They work too fast.”

“But that’s not all...*heh heh heh*.”

“What?”

“The centaur bitches are a beautiful lot, they say, every last one. They’re trying to capture them alive where they can. Oh, and the blue

skinned one that's leading them has been captured... Hear they had to cut off both her hind legs just to take her down though."

Kil! N-no... It can't be... Kil—!

Michaela clicked his tongue.

"Damned Sixth Order. They don't even consult me before they charge ahead with these decisions."

"They're having all the fun, aren't they?"

"This means we have to move fast..." Michaela turned his sharp eyes away from Lise to look off into the distance. "We need to get into the Country at the End of the World first and make sure that Sixth Order doesn't steal all the best toys. Let's go... Capture all those lamiae, will you? Anyone who wants to rape them right here, go ahead and try. Just not that fine one with the face veil, she's mine... Hm?"

He turned around.

"What is it?"

There was a commotion among knights assigned to the rearguard.

Lise closed her eyes tightly, then opened them again. The world around her was blurry and indistinct.

The knights... They're scattering?

"A suicide attack from the pathetic remnants of that sub-human army?"

"They know they're already dead."

"It seems their surprise attack has caught our men off guard. But it won't last long. Crush them!"

Dozens of the knights nearby lowered their spears and turned their mounts on the spot, ready to fight.

"Wait." Michaela's voice grew tense. "What is that thing?"

A long, black shadow was advancing toward them—a figure too tall to possibly be human. A battle cry went up, reaching all the way across the forest to Lise's ears.

"Hey, isn't that the leopardman from the report?!"

"So the one they killed was a fake?"

The knights' rearguard was pushed back, withdrawing in an

attempt to reform their lines. Lise saw terror in the eyes of the knights as they rode toward her in retreat—then saw a great black shadow leap onto one of their backs. That was when she recognized him, the strongest leopardman she knew, with a curved black katana in each hand.

“W-waaah?!” The retreating knight screamed as the leopardman swung at him—the blade sliced through the air, splitting it apart with a thunderous roar. The knight’s armor offered no resistance, and the man was severed cleanly in half. His corpse twisted and flopped apart, hanging grotesquely at the horse’s sides.

“Th-that thing’s a monst—”

A whirlwind of black with flashing red eyes shot past the knights. He was so much larger than the other leopardmen that he almost looked unreal standing next to them. Nobody else could wield those two huge black blades. Geo Shadowblade cut the knights to pieces one by one as they fled.

Tears formed in Lise’s eyes.

G-Geo...! You’re alive! Geo...

Michaela’s face turned purple with rage, though his expression remained emotionless.

“This wasn’t in the report. Kill them.”

“Th-this must have been the enemy’s plan all along! A p-plot to throw us off guard!”

“That blasted Sixth Order—what are they thinking? Tch...” He stepped on Lise, placing all his body weight on his foot to hold her down as she grunted under the pressure.

She was so stiff she couldn’t have moved regardless, nor was she in any emotional state to consider standing.

“Listen up!” Michaela shouted over the fighting. “Mighty knights of my First Order! The enemies we face are sub-humans, nature’s mistakes! They are savages who managed a cheap ambush and now think themselves warriors! Show them true battle! No mercy! Make a bloody example of that leopardman! A reward to all who aid in his slaughter! Charge!”

A battle cry went up, and the knights charged. Geo was clearly too far ahead of his own lines—the others behind him were still dealing

with the rearguard and hadn't caught up to him yet. But Geo didn't stop.

"G-Geo..." Lise wanted to call out in warning, to tell him to wait for the others to come and support him, but she couldn't find her voice.

"No fear, eh? That leopardman is going to be trouble—archer knights, in position!"

They were on the road, a single path leading through a valley with steep stone cliffs on either side. Knights wielding bows suddenly appeared atop the edges of the ravine.

An ambush. They must have come around using a different path to get into position above us.

Lise knew that such tactics were possible in the narrow valley they found themselves in—she simply never had any intention of fighting to begin with.

"Shoot that beast before the knights have to meet it in battle. Bring it down!"

The archer knights drew their bows and fixed their sights on Geo.

"Wh-why...?"

"Eh?"

"We... We showed you... We don't... We don't want to fight, yet..."

"You're still trying to sweet talk your way out of this? You never cease to amuse me."

"Sob..."

I don't understand.

I couldn't convince them.

I was wrong.

That fly... The Lord of the Flies was right. But it's too late for that now. We're too late.

"Ghhah?!"

"What's happening up there?!"

Michaela looked up at the cliffs and heard screams from above.

It was then that *they* appeared—Lise saw them clear as day as she

lay on her back in the dirt.

“Ah—!”

“We’re the ones taking control up here. Too bad, eh?” It was Kil Mail, holding a bow in her hands. The other centaurs appeared behind her, lined up and wielding bows of their own.

“K-Kil...”

“Wh-wh...” Michaela was trembling with rage. His hair bristled in the wind, but it almost seemed as if it was the anger that caused it to stand on end. “What are the other orders playing at?! Come on! They’re just a bunch of animals, nothing more! You archers, fire up at the cliffs, and— Wha—?!”

He stopped suddenly—it was as if he’d seen something he just couldn’t believe. His forces were losing. The knights who had charged at Geo were being overwhelmed.

Against that one insignificant animal?!

“What is that thing?!”

“I-I don’t wanna die!”

“It’s a monster!”

The knights in the rearguard, who had now retreated toward Micheala’s position, turned their horses on the spot again.

“B-but there are more leopardmen over there!” one of the knights exclaimed. “Look! There are so many of them! And we are now so few! Sir Gran!”

A black shadow appeared behind the knight who had just ordered the retreat, deep red eyes flashing. With a terrifying grunt, the shadow’s black blade swung horizontally at the knight. The horse’s head was severed, and the knight was split cleanly in two. Geo opened his mouth to let out a coarse, low growl. He was completely bathed in blood.

“I’ll kill you all.”

For a moment after he spoke, a deadly silence fell over the battlefield. The knights appeared to have no idea what to do. Their ranks crumbled, and they began to flee, attempting to escape the way they’d come. The centaurs sent a merciless shower of arrows and offensive magic raining down on them from above.

The First Order was in full retreat.

“Stop, cowards! Stop running!” Michaela called after them, but the knights were broken. “Gah! How could...? What’s happening...?!”

“S-Sir M-Michaela.”

Michaela was left standing in the forest, alone but for the man who appeared to be his vice-captain at his side. He turned, looking in the direction of the Country at the End of the World. The lamiae were gathering before him.

“What the hell...?” He ground his teeth. “We should advance! Charge toward those damn lamiae that only have shields!”

“Perhaps we can use this arachne! She can be our hostage!”

“Huh? Whatcha saying? That’s never going to work, y’know?”

A calm voice spoke from above. It was Kil, who was looking down on them with scorn in her eyes.

Michaela’s vice-captain screamed back at her, foaming at the mouth. “Th-this person... She’s your prime minister, is she not?! If you want her to live, then—”

“You haven’t heard?”

“What are you babbling about?!”

But Michaela’s expression showed that he understood. “I had forgotten...” he said quietly. “This arachne will be of no use to us as a hostage.”

“Why?!”

“I heard it from her own mouth... These soldiers rebelled against their own prime minister. I imagine they’d much rather see her dead than alive.” Michaela looked up at Kil. “I think this little spider is exactly where they want her to be.”

“That prime minister down there is the one that got us into this fight, y’know.”

“Ghh—! Ah...”

There was a sudden whooshing sound as Kil’s arrow hit the vice-captain right between the eyes.

“Kill her if you like. Not much point in it, though,” Kil urged him as she looked down from above, her eyes completely devoid of emotion.

Panicked sweat soaked Michaela’s brow as he turned to look at

the lamiae. He then glanced over his shoulder—Geo Shadowblade stood blocking his retreat, fur soaked with blood, red dripping from his blades. He looked like rage incarnate.

“Y-you savages!”

“So, what’ll it be?” asked Geo, spreading his arms wide and lifting his blades into the air. “You’re the leader, right? Might even think ’bout taking you prisoner if you ask nicely.”

Michaela surveyed the terrifying number of First Order corpses that lay strewn on the ground before him. A little further away, he saw leopardmen driving their blades into those that still breathed.

Their order had been completely destroyed.

He ground his teeth together in frustration.

“You...you beasts! Michaela Eucalyon will never be taken by the likes of—”

In a flash, two black shadows leapt from the cliffs above.

“Wh—?!”

It seemed they had passed by the centaurs unnoticed and jumped—a huge black steed with blazing eyes ridden by a woman in fly swordsman garb. The horse landed deftly, as if it barely registered the fall.

Then Michaela realized there was another standing beside the rider.

“Wh-where did...? Wh-who...?”

“My name is Belzegea,” said the Lord of the Flies. “Worry not. My Lord of the Flies Brigade is here to aid you. And not a moment too soon, First Order Captain Michaela.”

Chapter 5: Underhand

MICHAELA RECOGNIZED the name immediately.

“The Lord of the Flies—Belzegea...! Could it be....”

“I take it you know who I am, then.”

“Th-then that means?! The fly swordswoman by your side is...”

“Seras Ashrain.”

“Th-then she’s...”

In an instant, Geo picked up a spear from one of the fallen knights and launched it at her. Seras deflected it with her sword from atop her black steed—Michaela stood in complete awe.

“T-to think you could deflect a spear with such ease!”

“I am sure you have heard tales of the Battle for the White Citadel and know we consider the Demon King Empire an enemy that must be defeated. Our brigade sympathizes with the cause of the Sacred Alliance, and with the goals of the Goddess of Alion in particular.”

“You mean...”

“As I stated upon our arrival, we are here to aid you. We are allies.”

“I appreciate the assistance, but we’re surrounded!”

“My, are you not aware? In the Battle for the White Citadel, we defeated not only droves of humanoid-type monsters but the Demon King’s First of the Sworn himself. Compared to such foes...” The Lord of the Flies snorted derisively. “This rabble is no match for us.”

“Oh! How reassuring to hear!”

There was a light of hope in Michaela’s eyes. The Lord of the Flies held out his palm toward Lise.

“Paralyze.”

“Ah! Eh?”

Wh-what...? I cannot move my body... It is completely frozen!

“Wh-what did you just do...?” asked Michaela.

“Cursed magic. That ability can paralyze a target, similar to a status effect spell...though the quality of my magic is far superior. Now this arachne will be a useful hostage.”

“I have some bad news for you there, Belzegea...she won’t. Those leopardmen and centaurs w—”

“You are mistaken,” Belzegea interrupted. “That is a part of their plan. They intended to deceive you into believing your hostage had no value to dissuade you from making use of her. It appears their act has been successful. This arachne prime minister will serve us perfectly well as a hostage.”

“H-how can you be so sure...?”

“Because I visited the Country at the End of the World several days ago.”

“What?!”

“I approached them as a friend, spying on their lands from the inside.”

“U-unbelievable...”

“This prime minister is the backbone of their entire leadership. Her loss will prove a great blow to their country.”

“I see... You sub-human trash! Play tricks and deceive the great Michaela Eucalyon, will you?!”

“It appears you have something to say, Lise-dono?” said the Lord of the Flies.

“Y-you cretin!! Eh?! I c-can talk...”

“I have weakened the effect of my cursed magic to allow you to do so.”

Lise glared angrily at the fly but couldn’t stop the tears from pouring down her cheeks. She was filled with hatred, frustration, and regret.

“Is this your way of getting back at me?! This is...”

“Grating, isn’t she? Let us silence her once more,” said Belzegea.

“Mh—!” Lise lost the ability to speak again.

He must have strengthened the effect of that cursed magic nonsense of

his!

“Oh, and Geo, Kil, and Amia... Don’t move. If I see even a hint of it, I will not hesitate to kill Liselotte.”

They froze.

Lise wanted to speak, wanted to tell them, “*Don’t worry about me—just defeat them!*”

“I apologize, Michaela-dono.”

“Wh-what for?”

“I was late in coming to your aid. The movements of the First Order...at times I lost sight of you in such rocky terrain. I was unable to catch up, and we struggled to track your group through the forest.”

“Th-that’s fine! Do not let such trifles concern you! My First Order moves like the wind!”

“The Lord of the Flies Brigade perhaps cannot compare to you in speed, but my cursed magic is unmatched. We will make quick work of the small number of enemies that remain here to oppose us. We are completely outnumbered and surrounded, yet these savages do not even raise a hand against us...unmistakable evidence that they recognize our superiority.”

“The...” Michaela trembled with emotion as he tried to get the words out. “The tides have turned!”

He gave a twisted smile—his eyes were bloodshot red. His expression soon warped into a wide, triumphant grin at those around him.

“How do you feel now then, you filthy animals?! Get ready for what’s coming! I’m going to kill you all with the most terrifying and horrible torture! Oh, it’s going to be a sight to see! We’ll make a big torture brothel for all you bitches, just wait! Not going to be any mercy in there! You got kids?! We’re going to torture them in front of your eyes! Grovel all you want! It’s too late!”

“Incidentally...Michaela-dono.”

Michaela had worked himself up into a frenzy, his shoulders heaving up and down as he ranted.

“Yeah, yeah? What is it?”

“I understand our present circumstances are not ideal for

conversation...but there are some matters I wish to quickly discuss with you to cement our plans moving forward.”

Michaela seemed to regain his composure. “Yes, ask me anything. We’re comrades now, after all.”

The Lord of the Flies began to ask him a series of short questions. One in particular stood out to Lise.

“That dark elf village...the Shanatilis Clan, I believe? What became of them?”

While it was different from the other questions, Michaela showed no sign that he noticed anything out of the ordinary.

“I have a personal connection to that clan, in fact...” Belzegea continued. “I vowed to get revenge upon them one day. But I hear they were destroyed, were they not? I’ve heard a rumor that the ones who cleansed the village are now part of the Thirteen Orders of Alion. Do you know any further details on the matter?”

Michaela was silent—he looked to be struggling with something. “I know the story...” he said finally.

“If this topic is unpleasant for you, I do apologize for bringing it up.”

“No, you saved me from grave danger with your help here. It is an unpleasant tale, but I will tell you what I know. They’ve bragged of the story countless times.”

“*They*, you say?”

“The Sixth Order. I think all those who participated in the dark elf extermination are still alive. They are a rather unusual bunch, Captain Johndoe in particular...”

“I have nothing but gratitude for the men who slew those dark elves...but I have no intention of supporting them in battle.”

“I-is that so?” asked Michaela.

“*Heh heh*. Where they are a mere gang of thugs, you are a man of nobility, are you not? Born of a family that can trace its lineage back through the ages of Alion history. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind whose side I should be on.”

“You’re a smart one, aren’t you?”

“And you’re a hopeless idiot.”

“Eh...?”

Eh...? Lise’s reaction to the statement was much the same as Michaela’s. *Belzegea... What did he just say?*

The Lord of the Flies snorted disdainfully, then knocked Michaela’s feet out from under him with a kick that sent him sprawling to the ground. He lay there looking up, his eyes wide and dumbfounded.

“Paralyze.”

“Wh—?! ”

“That’s all the information I needed.” The Lord of the Flies’s tone of voice—and everything about him—flipped in an instant. He was cold and disparaging as he spoke his next merciless words.

“I think we’re done here.”



MIMORI TOUKA

E*NEMIES: I need only to crush them. All I have to do is kill them.*

Sometimes that can be hard, but in a way, it's simple.

The real difficulty comes with changing minds—dealing with individuals like Lise. When I first asked King Zect to summon the Seven Lights, what I really wanted to see was how easy it would be to change the prime minister's mind. I got my answer.

It would be almost impossible.

I didn't have anything to bring to the table. With half a year to prepare, I might have been able to gather evidence and make my case. But knowing that the Thirteen Orders of Alion might arrive at any moment, I couldn't wait that long. I had to take drastic action.

As soon as I realized I wasn't going to be able to change Lise's mind, I came up with a simple, improvised plan. I worked to understand the Four Shining Warriors' strengths—Seras's sparring matches were part of that. I'd hoped that Seras could at the very least spar against Geo, but luckily all four of them volunteered, and I got much more intel than expected. I learned a fair amount that day about the Four Shining Warriors—their personalities, and how they interact with each other.

I wanted to know for sure how they would vote, and that's when Geo came to talk with me. That night, I visited his house and learned how useful Lise was to the Country at the End of the World. I also learned of Geo's feelings on the situation and what he planned to do. If Geo lost the vote that day, he intended to sneak out at night to defeat the Thirteen Orders of Alion, taking his own band of soldiers with him. He wanted me to come along, but I offered him a different plan instead.

Geo's idea was a good one, and Kil would likely come along as well. But the problem was Lise. After Geo's attack, Lise would be boiling with rage.

We could have resolved this peacefully, she would think, but because of Geo and Kil, all our efforts were completely wasted.

If the Thirteen Orders of Alion had been defeated before the negotiations could even begin, it would create a rift between Lise and the others and make her all the more suspicious of them. There was

even the possibility she would follow through on her promise to take the arachne and leave the country entirely. But Geo knew the importance of Lise to the Country at the End of the World...even though he didn't agree with her.

And from my perspective, I'd rather the country wasn't weakened. Nyaki will be living there for now, after all. Lise and the other arachne are competent leaders, so I don't want them out of the picture.

Even if the vote did go in favor of battle, Lise would never have accepted it. The vote itself wasn't capable of changing her mind. She would be disappointed in the rest of the Four Shining Warriors and might even abandon their country. The country could overcome the Alion threat...but without the Arachne, it would wither and die with time. They couldn't afford to lose Liselotte Onik and the other arachne—and yet they couldn't afford to greet the Orders of Alion with outstretched hands.

So I decided to manipulate the results. Not in favor of fighting but toward a vote for peaceful negotiation. After I left Geo's house, I moved quickly to visit Amia too. Lise was nowhere to be seen, but I knew I was being tailed by an arachne. That was precisely the reason I went. Amia told me that Lise had come to convince her about an hour before I'd arrived. I was careful to ensure that the arachne tailing me was not eavesdropping on our conversation as I explained my thoughts to Amia...

"Hmm... So you want me to vote *with* the prime minister?"

"I want Lise-dono to win the vote, yeah."

"You talked to Geo about this?"

"I have."

"Hmm, so you're planning on trapping her with this big scheme of yours, eh...?"

"You can refuse if you want to."

"Nah. I was going to vote for battle anyway."

"I expected you to side with the pacifists, given how many lamia

mothers there are right now...”

“What? You know about that too? Listen, Sir Belzegea...I can’t have you underestimating the Lynx Clan, can I? They’re taking up swords to protect their children, not throwing them down.”

“It’s just as Lise said. I can’t show you definite proof that the Thirteen Orders of Alion are a bunch of thugs. And I’m also relying on your country’s strength to fight them. That’s a fact. Even then, you’d still vote to fight?”

“Your companions helped me decide.”

“My companions?”

“Seras, Nyaki, Sleii, Piggymaru...”

“Squee.”

“No, she wasn’t talking to you, Piggymaru.”

“Squee...”

“*Heh heh*. When I saw your companions, I knew I could trust you. They don’t have stupid, blind faith in you. I don’t think anyone who has so many people who love and follow them can be a liar. So if you’re scamming me, then you’re a great con man. That’s all I can say, yep.”

So Amia agreed to vote with Lise.

I decided to only let Geo and Amia know of my intentions for the upcoming vote. I didn’t want anything to seem out of place by letting too many people in on the details, which would have increased the risk that Lise caught on to our scheme. There were no problems with the arachne that had been tailing me after that.

I left Amia’s house and hid nearby to watch the arachne spy enter—I had already asked Amia ahead of time to explain to them that I had tried to convince her but her mind remained unchanged. I made a big show of appearing disappointed as I left as well. I could have thrown off the arachne tail any time I wanted to, but I deliberately led her on.

It was all to communicate to Lise’s side that I had failed to convince Amia. In her mind, the vote was a certain victory, three votes

to two—she must have been sure of it. And the morning of the vote only proved her right.

Meanwhile, I sent Seras out to gather intel for me. She'd learned all about the Country at the End of the World's armies from Gratrah. For my part, Geo had told me much of the same information. We sat down together to discuss what we still needed to know. Geo spoke to Kil after choosing to go along with my idea, and surprisingly, she decided to help us. The day after the vote was taken, I told the king of my plans to leave his country.

I had been to see Munin after I left Amia's house to explain the situation, this time throwing off my tail before doing so—Lise should have had no idea that I met with her. Munin understood everything I had to say and promised to go along with the plan.

And so our Lord of the Flies Brigade went out ahead of the armies themselves to scout the rocky area outside that would be our battlefield and get a feel for the terrain. Beyond that, we had to track the movements of the Thirteen Orders of Alion—especially if they were already somewhere close by.

That was why I had another favor to ask of Nyaki.

"It's not goodbye just yet," I told her.

Nyaki knew that, but she was still so sad that day outside the castle as she watched us leave. Even if it was just an act, watching us go must've made her feel lonely.

Her job was to act as our connection to the inside. I expected Lise to send out search parties to find the Thirteen Orders of Alion so she could begin negotiations with them. In other words, she'd be opening and closing that door a lot—and she'd need to use Nyaki to do it.

I watched harpies leave and return to the country multiple times while Seras and I were out searching the forest. After we had gotten an understanding of the Thirteen Orders' movements, we snuck back to the silver door and made contact with Nyaki. She passed the date of the army's arrival to Geo and Kil on the inside, who then led their armies out of the country with Nyaki's help in opening the door. Lise had already ordered the kobolds away from the area near the door, so the way was clear for them to leave unnoticed.

The group of knights we found seemed to be further ahead of the others. I knew that the Thirteen Orders varied in size and knew the

knights we found couldn't be the extent of the orders' strength. This particular group seemed to be hurrying for some unknown reason—as if they couldn't bear to lose the race. I expect it was exactly that sense of competition that made them rush in ahead of the rest.

We joined up with Geo and Kil on the outside and discussed army movements and terrain for the upcoming battle. The order of knights was resting nearby; they had probably pushed so recklessly far ahead of the others that they tired out their horses. I watched them as they took their break and got a good idea of exactly what kind of men they were. They sent out a messenger, but I attacked him and stole his horse and armor.

After the rest of the order got back on their feet, they proceeded at an incredible speed. I falsified a series of reports from the other Orders of Alion following behind them. I knew that they were so caught up in being first that they would pay little attention to who I was.

“The knights behind you have been caught by an enemy ambush! But they're winning! It seems the battle will be won in short order!”

I became a nameless, faceless voice—nothing in my actions should have drawn attention or left an impression on any of them. I thought about how they would react to the things I told them.

“That Sixth Order lot should have no problem mopping them up! They'll turn the situation around! We can't have our First Order knights go hungry for some nastiness, can we?! Forward, hurry!”

By that point, I knew that Lise must have realized that Geo and Kil were missing—she would be on her way. All her plans would come to nothing if Geo started a fight before the negotiations could even begin. She would panic and hurry outside to stop them.

I had the leopardmen—adept at concealing themselves—scouting the path through the valley. I knew that if both Lise and the order kept going as they were, they were going to collide. I gave my orders to Geo and Kil, telling them to hide and wait for the right opportunity to strike. I then disguised myself as a messenger again and waited until Amia's sound sphere rang out across the area.

I gave Amia instructions to activate the sound sphere when she felt we were needed...when Lise's life was in danger. I also instructed her to stand by Lise's side during the negotiations no matter what and to use her great skill with a shield to protect her if it came to that.

I waited for the right timing, then approached the rearguard of the order as a messenger once more and gave them the false report that Geo and Kil's armies had both been destroyed. This also calmed the knights at the back of the line, making them less wary of attacks from the rear.

Geo and the rest of the Shadowblade Clan waited behind me, staying low and hiding. We had scouted an area suited to that purpose ahead of time, and the leopardmen were experts at concealing themselves.

Geo was impressed. "You understand well how to use the strengths of leopardmen."

Of course I do, I thought to myself. I traveled with the strongest bloodsport warrior in the world on my way to the witch's house, after all...

Finally, the sound sphere rang out.

"Let's go."

With those two words, Geo led the leopardmen into battle. In the meantime, Kil and her centaurs snuck up to the clifftops to take out the enemy reinforcements from behind.

I expect the Lord of the Flies Brigade's appearance will come a little later. I've ordered them to leave the leader alive if possible, so...when he's cornered, we can appear like rescuing heroes dashing to the scene to save him. We'll make him think we're on his side so he'll give up intel.

But what was the real key to this plan? It was...

"The key was to have Liselotte Onik experience reality on a personal level," I said after briefly running through my plans. Michaela was trying to talk through his paralysis, but I ignored him and continued with my explanation.

"To counteract deep-rooted beliefs like hers, she had to experience the realities of Alion personally. She would have to watch her ideals crumble away... I needed her to see that and *feel* it."

Negotiations were never going to work. The people she was dealing with are evil.

“I had to make her understand.”

We were lucky with how this turned out in a lot of different ways. We had to be flexible, sure...but the First Order just came charging in looking for glory. That let us take them out before engaging the other orders, and it was easier than I anticipated. I would've preferred to take out the Sixth Order instead, but maybe that's asking too much.

“But now, Lise...Prime Minister Lise, I should say...” I began

“Sob... Th-there's no need for f-formalities,” said Lise, her head down and clearly on the verge of tears.

“If you have not changed your mind, I will have to restrain you until this battle is won.”

“Sob...”

“Sir Belzegea, I'm sorry,” Amia apologized, looking down at the ground with trembling fists. “I was late giving the signal.”

She's right—I would've preferred that to come a little sooner.

“I was so confused that I couldn't act...so dumbfounded by the cruelty of that man. I never knew humans were capable of such terrible things. How little they think of us—we're just playthings for them. The shock was so great I forgot to give the signal. It's my fault the prime minister was assaulted.”

“Don't blame yourself. I told you, right? I'm the one responsible for all this—if something happens in the battle that you can't accept, blame it on me.”

“I know, it's just...”

“...”

“The role you chose me to play—it was too cruel.”

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I wanted to rely on your decision making. I also knew that as the strongest defensive member of the Four Shining Warriors that you would be best suited to protect Lise, even without a weapon. Still, I'm sorry... You're right. It was cruel of me to put you there.”

“Oh, shut up, Lord of the Flies,” Geo interrupted. “I'm the one who pushed Amia for the role, ain't I? Don't pull the martyr act with us.

I was going to attack if we lost the vote no matter what. You just gave us a winning plan, yeah?"

Just then, we got word that a new group of knights was closing in, pursuing Geo and the other leopardmen. He grunted and shot a look over his shoulder.

"Giving us a bit more trouble than I expected... Maybe your fears were right. Eh, Belzegea?"

"No. It's the first time most of your forces have ever killed anyone with a weapon, isn't it? I think you did well. Right now it might be held off by the excitement of battle, but some of your soldiers might go into shock once the fighting's over. Make sure to care for them, okay?"

Normal people would go into shock. It's strange that I never have.

"You..." Lise kept her eyes on the ground as she spoke. "You despise me, don't you? You always have..."

"You were desperate, right?"

"...Huh?"

"You wanted to save the Country at the End of the World, and you didn't want any bloodshed. That's all you could think about, right? I knew that...and I could never bring myself to hate you for it. Geo thinks highly of you as well, you know."

Lise raised her head. Half of her face was bloody, red and painfully swollen.

"Geo... He said that?"

"That was a big part of the reason this plan worked so well. Geo... He told me the country wouldn't be able to sustain itself without you. That Liselotte Onik was necessary to its continued existence."

"That human...told me that Geo had been killed. That Kil was captured and maimed..." Lise looked over at the dead vice-captain. "When I heard them say that, I felt such pain. Geo and I fight so often, but we're on the same side... I realize that now. I regret that it took me so long to finally accept it. I want to th-thank you."

The dam finally burst, and tears began to flow from Lise's eyes. "Thank you for being alive."

"Hmph," grunted Geo, looking away. "What's this now? It ain't like you."

“Hey, what are you blushin’ about, Geo?”

“Shut up, Amia. Yeesh...”

“*Heh heh heh*,” Lise laughed through her tears.

I drew Michaela’s sword from its scabbard.

“So, Lise...do you still want to negotiate with the Thirteen Orders of Alion?”

“I won’t give up on peace,” she said, her head still low with tears in her eyes. “But...I will not negotiate with the Thirteen Orders of Alion. Belzegea... In this matter I will defer to the decision you have made. You are a human, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I will not lump all humans together. I do not think all of your race are evil—there must be some good people who want peace... Even after all this...”

“That’s good.”

Lise gave a start at my reply and looked up.

“I’m relieved to hear you say that,” I continued. “You’re going to be discerning about who you talk to, right? It’s good to be confident in your own abilities, but you should also learn how to doubt. How to doubt the things you hear, other people...even yourself, at times.”

“I will. I thought I was always right—always thought I could resolve anything, no matter the issue. But in the end...” Lise looked down the path that led to the silver door. “That was only true behind that door. Because the people of my country trust me...”

“Time to wrap things up?” asked Kil casually.

A number of centaurs had accompanied her down the cliffs, taking a detour to come meet us in the valley.

I guess from that height, only Slel and I can handle the fall. And in my case, it’s because I’ve got Piggymaru rope to cushion my fall and stat modifiers strengthening my leg muscles.

“I’ve posted centaurs at both ends of the path—they’ll come running if there’s any threat. So is our prime minister doing okay?” asked Kil.

Lise started sobbing again. “Kil...I’m so sorry!”

“She sounds fine to me.”

“I... I...”

“Let me apologize too, 'kay?”

“Huh?”

“The way I spoke to you in front of the knights was all an act, but...I'm still sorry for it. It was hard for me to say those things, y'know?”

“I know... I know it was to save me... I am your prime minister after all—do not underestimate my strategic mind.”

Lise's expression softened slightly, though it was still pained. Kil gave a happy little laugh, but when she saw Lise's face, she furrowed her brow with concern. She fixed Michaela with a cold glare.

“He really did a number on our Prime Minister Lise, eh...?”

“What should we do with him, Lord of the Flies?” asked Geo.

“He knows way too much, doesn't he?” I kicked him over and placed the blade of his sword on his chest, resting it on a gap in his armor.

Keep pushing here, and I can sink this blade straight into his heart.

“Sd-sdop...I-I'm...a-a...nble...! R-ranso...m... Ho-s-da...g...”

“What's that? You're some big-shot noble, so we could ransom you off for a ton of money? I don't care.”

“Ghh... Wh-why... A-allies...? Th-th...G...ddess...”

“The Goddess? What, you still think I'm on that foul Goddess's side? You've gotta be kidding me.”

Idiot.

“You never cease to amuse me.”

“H-helb...”

“You made me remember somethin' I'd much rather forget.”

Looking at the way he's punched Lise, it's almost as if...

Just once. I only asked once.

Why was she doing this? I couldn't understand why.

"Mom, why do you...? Why do you always hit me?"

"Huh? Huh?!"

"I-I'm sorry! Waahh!"

"Why?! You wanna know *why*?! Who the heck do you think you are, Too-ka?! Lemme ask you! Why do I need a reason to beat my own property?! Huh?! Hey, I'm goin' for the face now. Your face! You got that? Too-ka ain't going outside for a long while after tonight!"

"Ghha?! Mom, I'm s-sorr- Gh?! Ghah?!"

"You're only pissin' me off more when you don't cry! C'mon, cry! Cry! What's with everyone askin' for freakin' reasons anyway?! Nobody in this country can think a single damn thing for themselves! I'm freakin' sick of it! I didn't have a freakin' reason for givin' birth to you! What, I gotta have a reason to beat the snot out of you now?! Ah, man, I wish I could sell you too, already—hey somethin' sold! Huuh?! What the heck, this guy wants it for cheaper?! Die! This is all your freakin' fault, Too-ka!"

Bang, thump, bang, thud, crack, bang, thump.

I slowly pushed down on the blade.

Michaela was clearly terrified.

"St-p..."

The blade went in slowly.

I took my time, finding a gap in his rib cage and burying the sword in his lungs.

I won't kill you quickly.

"Those things you said to Lise... Somethin' about brothels and torture, right? Pathetic, all of it. I don't care if you're some noble, I can imagine what kinda life you've lived. You're worthless scum. I know—

because I'm scum too?"

"Gpf... Pfh..."

Blood flowed from Michaela's mouth.

"Terrified, huh? You've done this to others, haven't you...done whatever you wanted to them...but I guess this is your first time on that end of the sword."

"Ghh, bhf... Ghh... Ohh... Bfph..."

He started to choke on the blood filling his lungs, spluttering, unable to breathe.

"You figured I'd save you, but now you know that was all a lie. I bet you feel true despair right now. Betrayed, mocked, and abused—how's it feel? This is exactly what you did to Lise." I looked down at him through my mask as I spoke the final words. "Serves you right."

Soon, Michaela breathed his last. I saw that Lise wore a conflicted expression on her face.

"Lise... I know you probably had ideas about capturing him. But I killed him. I wanted to—that's all. Personal feelings of mine."

"But to kill him in such a way... Was there a point to that?"

"Who knows?"

"..."

When I get reminded of my past like that, sometimes I just can't hold myself back. It makes me want to kill—to crush without mercy.

"Lise. Maybe for a moment back there it looked to you like I was some kind of savior, come to bring you to your senses. I'm not that good a person."

Actually, I just got lucky.

"I used you all as decoys. That's how I was able to move Kil and Geo to surround the First Order and defeat them. We only managed it because the enemies' attention was on you. That made it easier for Kil to take those knights from behind as well."

It was effective from a strategic perspective—the centaurs and leopardmen suffered basically no casualties.

"Of course I wanted Amia to be there to protect you, but...in the worst-case scenario, I knew it was possible you could die."

We just got lucky.

“I knew you might die, but the other arachne would remain. That’d leave arachne in place to maintain the ancient magical devices powering the city and enough political leaders for the government to keep functioning. It would have given us another way of explaining why the Thirteen Orders of Alion are a threat that they can’t negotiate with—we’d explain that you misjudged them and were killed in the process.”

Lise looked down at the ground.

I don’t want to over-act the villain, but I’m no hero either. The way I do things—some people might think of my methods as cruel. Lise, for example.

I called out to Seras, who was still mounted on Slei’s back. “Will you take Slei out of this valley and check out the area ahead?”

“Understood.”

“Don’t do anything reckless—not that I think you ever would.”

Seras moved to leave immediately, but then stopped and thought in silence for a moment, turning to look intently at Lise.

“Prime Minister Lise, I have one thing to say... When my master saw you being beaten by that man, he was agonizing over whether to go ahead and help you without even waiting for Lady Amia’s signal. I was the one who stopped him.”

“Ah?”

“I am sorry, Sir Belzegea. It was not my place to reveal that.”

“Well...not here and now at least.”

“I am sorry...but I believe it was something I had to say,” said Seras, who then turned on Slei and galloped away down the valley path.

Lise sniffed and rubbed the tip of her nose.

“Those things you just said—none of them were incorrect,” she said begrudgingly, grinding her teeth. “Setting aside the way you killed the man, I think I would have thought the same things in your position. No, I know for a fact I would have. You are trying to say that I should not become overly trusting of you simply because you saved me, correct? This was all just a roundabout way of reminding me of that?”

“I’ll leave that up to your interpretation.”

“You can’t just come out and say it?”

“In any case, the enemy’s forces are still out there. They’re great in number, and I hear some of them might cause us some real trouble. This is where the real fight begins. Are you all ready for this?”

“We don’t have a choice, eh,” said Geo, folding his arms. “But... you’re lying to us, Lord of the Flies.”

“Hmm?”

“That Michaela idiot lyin’ down there—you ’n him ain’t the same.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Least far as I can see, everyone else here agrees with me on that.”

Amia looked at me with her thin, creased eyes. She placed her index finger under her face veil and scratched her jaw in thought.

“When I saw that human suffer and die, it made me feel kinda relieved... Yeah. Is there something wrong with that, maybe?” she said.

“Not gonna lie...” answered Kil. “Made me feel better too. I don’t think badly of you, Fly Guy. Is the stuff you’re saying really that weird? Just sounds realistic to me. Or, at the very least, I think it’s something we can compromise on, right?”

Geo gave a growl and smiled. “So she says.”

“You really are good people. Way too nice,” I replied.

“Yeah? You’re complimenting us, Sir Belzegea?” asked Amia.

“Do you think that was a compliment, Amia?”

“I like a nice compliment.”

“Then it was a compliment.”

“I don’t like that mean part of your personality though, Sir Belzegea!”

Well, I guess this lamia has her quirks. She’s weirdly quick at getting over things, I guess? Not that I mind that at all.

“I take it you understand the situation, Lise...but I can hardly ask you to switch straight into thinking of this as a war.”

I looked to see demi-humans and monsters from the Country at the End of the Word gathering some distance down the path. The

lamiae had weapons in their hands now, having gone to retrieve them from beyond the silver door at Amia's instruction. Cocoroniko was there too with her Band of the Shining Dragon. It looked like she was still trying to make sense of the situation, and her troops were hanging back and observing. Geo and Amia called out to them, and the whole Band of the Shining Dragon crowded their way toward us.

"Lise, you go back beyond the silver door and rest. You're going to need treatment too," I said.

"I am staying," she replied determinedly. "I will remain. My country is the most important thing in the world to me. I cannot shirk my duty on account of such trifling injuries."

She can really change gears fast, huh.

"That's exactly what made Geo want to save your life..."

"Tch! S-silence! I won't be taken in by your kind words!"

It's been a long time since I've seen a tsundere like this in the wild.

"But get some basic first aid, at least."

"I don't need to be told to do that...!" Lise's shoulders suddenly sank—she still wore a faint smile on her lips, but there was a sadness there too as she rose to stand next to me. "In the face of reality, it is hard for one's idealism to survive."

"But there are some people that can push their ideals through and overturn reality completely."

The thing that Liselotte Onik lacked was power—overwhelming individual combat strength. Idealism without strength is powerless—but idealism with real force behind it can sometimes swallow up even reality itself.

Ideas can force reality to change its very shape.

"I will not let anybody die."

But there is someone who might be able to pull it off—Sogou Ayaka.

"I'm going to become stronger than anybody else."

Ever since we reunited, I remember her at times like this—even when I don't want to.

"Hey, Belzegea...don't you hate me? I was so rude to you."

"Of course I don't hate you."

Compared to the way I feel about a certain foul Goddess, Lise's attitude was cute, even. I have so little enmity toward her.

"Maybe that's why I was able to find a way to save you."

"Right." Lise took a few steps forward. "Geo, Kil, Amia, Nico... everyone." She turned to face her countrymen. "Will you accept me as one of you again...? Please." She lowered her head to them. "Please, lend me your strength."

The Four Shining Warriors, the demi-humans, the monsters—all answered her that they would.

Lise raised her voice over the crowd, wiping a tear from her eye. "For now, you are to follow Belzegea's orders—is that understood?!"

A great affirmative roar went up from those in the valley.

Everything came together. These people from the Country at the End of the World before me now...they've resolved to fight and survive.

I looked over my shoulder, away from the country these people had assembled to protect.

We're fighting for our very survival.

"We're going to war... So let's get started then, shall we?"

THE WILDLY BEAUTIFUL EMPEROR

FALKENDOTZINE MIRA DIASORDSEAT, the Wildly Beautiful Emperor Zine, looked down on the land from on high. He could see dust rising far in the distance.

Cavalry movement. Likely the knights from our reports.

The wind finally stirred, setting Zine's golden hair flowing in the breeze. His hair hung in two long bunches down to his knees. The air gently caressed his stunningly beautiful face.

"Your Majesty." It was Luheit Mira, Zine's older half brother, commander of the forces of Mira and Commander General of all military strategic affairs. "I have just received report that we have taken the fortress of Zoldo."

“What of the Monster Slayer Knights?”

“They put up a token fight but are presently in retreat. They realize they are no match for our Band of the Sun.”

“The Dragonslayer’s absence affects them greatly, as expected. Will our forces manage without you?”

“For now, yes. As I’m sure you’re aware, our generals are all supremely capable leaders.”

“The fruit does not fall far from the tree.”

“Quite.”

“What of the Alion reinforcements?”

“They are yet to arrive, it seems.”

“Luck was on our side while capturing Zoldo. But we will face difficulties if those that fought at the Battle for the White Citadel come to their aid—at least those that passed through that field of death and lived to tell the tale.”

“I have ordered a retreat and abandoning of the fortress of Zoldo should any of the S-class heroes appear on the battlefield.”

S-class heroes... Hijiri Takao and Takuto Kirihara, the two rumored to have pushed the Demon King back in the east.

And Ayaka Sogou, destroyer of the Inner Circle Demon. I hear her referred to as the “Humanoid Monster Slayer” often of late.

“Do you have any alterations to those orders?”

“No need. More important is the matter of how we view the battle occurring here.”

Zine narrowed his eyes, scanning the land that lay spread out before him. “The majority of the Band of the Sun have been sent to engage Ulza... Shall we call some of them to return?”

“No, I do not think that necessary. Even if the Thirteen Knights of Alion have been dispatched here as our intel suggests, very few of them are true threats to us.”

“The strongest are the Sixth Order, I take it?”

“Captain Johndoe in particular.”

“Understood.”

“But this is also a good chance for Mira. Perhaps sensing Alion’s weakness, the Country at the End of the World has opened itself to the outside. Now then...” Zine placed a hand to the hilt of the Divine Blade that hung at his waist. “I wonder where I should move my pawns next—and where I myself should be positioned.”

The emperor sensed that Luheit was hesitating, but before long he opened his mouth to speak with clear determination in his tone.

“I will be by your side to protect you, Your Majesty. I will defend you, even if it costs me my life. But please, I beg of you...look after your own safety above all else.”

Zine looked back at his older brother, fixing him with his clear, dark-green eyes. Those eyes softened as he spoke. “Of course. I am not about to take death by the hand just yet. Especially now that we have such a powerful ally on our side.”

To the emperor’s right, a little farther from him, she stood surveying the ever-turbulent battlefield below as Zine turned to look with her.

“Isn’t that right, Asagi Ikusaba?”



Epilogue

IN THE DORMITORY of the heroes of Alion, Sogou Ayaka was in her private room, stretching. When that was done, she moved on to practice with her spear, thrusting it through the air.

Hmm... I'm recovering faster than I expected to. The stress the kyokugen technique placed on my body is fading. Just in time. Tomorrow, the heroes finally head north.

Five days ago, a large group of enemy troops had been reported massing near the Nightwall, and the Demon King himself had even been seen. Ayaka had never seen the Demon King in person, but Takao Itsuki had drawn her a picture.

"Heh heh, I'm way better at drawing than you are, Aneki!"

Ayaka remembered Itsuki's words—she wasn't lying.

I suppose it is somewhat rude of me to think this, but I was a little surprised. More importantly...that image of what we must fight against...

The creature in her drawing had looked terrible—a great horrifying fortress of a beast.

A part of the Demon King's army was reported to be heading east at speed, perhaps to take Alion through an eastern invasion route.

"It's as if they're acting in concert with Mira in the west. Such truly awful timing. No...they are acting now because they know there is confusion within our ranks," The Goddess had said, analyzing the situation. *And at such scale... Perhaps they intend this battle to be the final one of their campaign."*

The Demon King—root of all evil—was capable of spawning forth an infinite number of golden-eyed monsters, but they couldn't afford to send those monsters over to the heroes and feed them experience points. The longer their war continued, the more the Demon King would be at a disadvantage. The Goddess was rendered powerless by the Demon King essence, as were the rest of the humans in this world. Only the Heroes from Another World were unaffected—they were the Demon King's one and only natural enemy.

In the recent invasion, the Demon King had split the S-class heroes

up and launched a surprise attack against the White Citadel of Protection. They used a demonic device to call humanoid monsters to the scene and added the First and Second of the Sworn Inner Circle demons to their ranks.

Looking back, it was painfully obvious to Ayaka that their intention had been to completely wipe out all the heroes in one strike. There had been no fronts that the Demon King had not tried to completely overwhelm—nothing had been held back.

“I believe the root of all evil this time around is by far the strongest that has ever been,” the Goddess had noted to the heroes assembled before her in the square. *“But you heroes are the most powerful that have ever existed to match. I am announcing that our Sacred Alliance, along with the heroes of Alion, will march north to the Nightwall and exterminate the Demon King and his golden-eyed monsters.”*

The Goddess herself had described the battle to come as the “Battle to Vanquish the Demon King.”

They were to be led by Sogude Sigmus, Chief Rider of Magnar’s White Wolf Riders. Their forces were mostly made up of Alionese, Neahan, and Bakossi soldiers, as well as the White Wolf Riders themselves. Ulza could spare no troops with their fight against Mira to the west, to which Alion was also contributing significant forces. The recent attacks had taken a toll on the Neahan and Bakossi armies, so their contributions were not great either. Yonato and Magnar barely had enough soldiers left to defend themselves and could not hope to contribute anything to the mission north.

The heroes were the most important military force on the continent now.

Kirihara Takuto had raised an objection to the selection of their leader.

“Don’t tell me, Vicius. You truly intend on disappointing me further? This Sogude man... Do you truly believe him to be more than Kirihara—a truer king than I? You leave me no choice but to doubt your sanity...”

But Takao Hijiri had been able to convince him. Not even Kirihara Takuto (though he was reluctant) could resist Hijiri’s eloquent reasoning.

She’s amazing.

She tightened her grip on the spear.

Finally... The final battle against the Demon King is beginning.

At that moment, the Takao sisters came to visit.

“We’ve been summoned.”

“Ahem, could you wait a moment? I will be right there once I’ve changed.”

“It’s fine, you don’t need to hurry.”

“Hey...Class Rep?”

“Yes, Itsuki-san?”

“Are you, like, the type that looks slimmer than you really are?”

“Itsuki, this is not the time for such discussions,” scolded Hijiri.

“Sorry, Class Rep...”

“I-it’s fine... Don’t worry about it, Itsuki-san. Well then, I will be out in a moment.” Ayaka closed the door, quickly changed into her usual hero attire, and opened it again. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Hijiri stood up from the wall she had been leaning back against. “Then let us go.”

Ayaka locked her door, and the three of them walked down the hallway together.

“So we’re, like, finally going to be traveling to the big last battle now, huh,” said Itsuki.

“Yes... We’ve made it this far.” There was a nervousness in Ayaka’s voice.

Itsuki patted her on the shoulder and laughed. “Hey, I know how you feel. Let’s take it easy, eh, Class Rep?”

“Y-yes... Thank you, Itsuki-san.”

“You’re welcome!”

I’m glad Itsuki’s so cheerful right now.

Hijiri, unlike her younger sister, was as calm and collected as ever.

“We need to defeat this Demon King before anything else can happen. We must obtain the Demon King’s heart, or...” Hijiri’s eyes flitted down, and she touched the black crystal collar around her neck.

“We can absorb that Demon King Essence into this collar.”

“Hm? Hijiri-san, that collar...”

“The Goddess called me to her office today. She entrusted it to me.”

It appears the Goddess really trusts her. She seems to have lightened up on Hijiri of late.

“I wonder if we are capable of this.”

“I understand why you’re worried, yeah. I mean, I don’t think I’m going to be able to do everything perfectly either.”

“Hey, Hijiri-san... Do you really think the Goddess is going to—”

“Hold that thought.”

A maid came walking toward them down the hallway carrying a stack of folded sheets. There were two knights as well, coming up the stairwell from the opposite end of the hallway.

Hijiri placed her index finger to Ayaka’s lips.

“Sogou-san, let us not discuss that here.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking...”

This isn’t good. I have to pull myself together. I’m an S-class hero...but more importantly, I’m still the class representative of 2-C...

Ba-dmp—

What...? What was that?

It was *pressure*. There was a terrible, intimidating *something* in the air, and a feeling ran through Ayaka’s whole body.

“Ah!”

“Hey, Aneki, this is...!”

“Yes.”

The three of them rushed down the hallway toward the maid, who collapsed before they made it, spilling her folded sheets onto the floor. Itsuki held her up in a sitting position as the maid began to convulse in her arms, eyes rolling back in her head. Itsuki tried to speak to her, but she was in no condition to respond.

“Those two as well.”

At Hijiri’s words, Ayaka turned to see that the two knights had both collapsed and were on the floor in much the same state.

“Hey, Aneki?! Isn’t this, like, super seriously bad?!” As the maid in Itsuki’s arms began foaming at the mouth, she glared off down the hallway. “Come on... What in the freakin’ world is happening here?!”

The hallway was quiet—there were no other signs of commotion.

But even at a time like this...

“Nothing is happening to us,” said Hijiri, looking down at the maid. Ayaka could see some small signs of anxiety growing in her expression.

She had a sudden realization.

We’re the only ones unaffected? What is the only thing that doesn’t affect Heroes from Another World?

“Hijiri-san... You don’t think this could be...D-Demon King Essence?”

“Yes, it’s likely. And for it to appear with such intensity, the creature must be close by.”

“Meaning it’s within the castle walls. Or the grounds, at least?” Hijiri questioned herself, narrowing her eyes. Ayaka was struck with doubt as well.

But it’s strange to think the essence is so concentrated...

“Hijiri-san... I felt as if this essence came upon us suddenly, with no warning. Not to mention...” Ayaka turned to look back down the hallway.

“Class Rep?”

Ayaka looked at the two knights. She knew their faces; they had fought with her at the Battle for the White Citadel.

“Many people fainted on that battlefield due to essence exposure, but it wasn’t this intense.”

The Demon King Essence...could it have been this bad?

“Sogou-san, you’ve seen the effect the essence of the First and Second of the Sworn had on people—and at a comparatively close distance, haven’t you?”

“...Yes.”

“Do you believe this essence is stronger than that of an Inner Circle Demon, in your experience?”

“I don’t know if this is really essence... I just... The *strength* of it... In any case, it’s *different*.”

I have a terrible feeling about this.

“I felt a connection,” said Hijiri.

“A c-connection...?” asked Ayaka

“It was far from me and indistinct...but I saw that thing on the eastern front.”

“Eh? Hey, Aneki... Eh? W-wait, y-you’re saying...”

“I must see this with my own eyes, but I think the possibility is high. We should go outside and check.”

The three of them looked at each other, all of them knowing they had reached the same inevitable conclusion.

Chills ran down Ayaka’s spine. Her temples were pounding. Over and over, it throbbed in her head as sweat streamed down her face.

Ayaka had no idea how this could’ve happened—she couldn’t even guess.

All she had were questions.

Why?! But if the information we have is correct—there’s only one answer, isn’t there?

“He’s here in person this time.”

The Demon King.

Afterword

IN THIS VOLUME, Too-ka's doing battle with a new

kind of enemy he's never faced before. Compared to the others he could easily crush, this one might be the trickiest he's had to deal with. Also in this seventh volume, we had a chapter titled "Meanwhile, Across the Continent," in which I hope you were able to get a sense of how all the other characters are moving around. In this printed version, while the main focus is on Too-ka and Seras, I feel like I've been able to give Ayaka and Hijiri's relationship a little more depth.

Due to the length of the book, I've had to cut this section a little short, so on to the acknowledgments. Thank you to my editor O-sama, to KWKM-sama (I especially like the new two-person illustration in this volume), and to Keyaki Uchiuchi-sama and Sho Uyoshi-sama for their work on the story and art of the manga adaptation respectively. I'd also like to thank the manga editor M-sama and everyone else who is responsible for bringing these books to print. Thank you to the web novel readers once again for continuing to read.

Deep thanks finally to you, as always, for picking up this seventh volume.

Well, then, I pray we meet in the next volume, when all kinds of "!"-inducing developments may occur.

—Kaoru Shinozaki



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